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MAGAZINE

JANUARY 1997

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by D. A. McGuire

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on Cape Cod

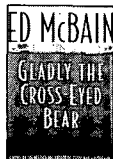
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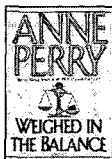
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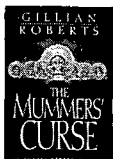
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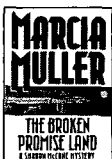
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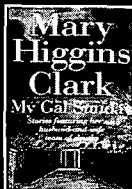
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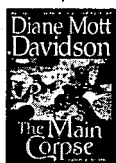
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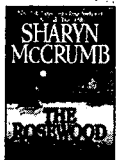
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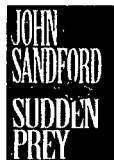
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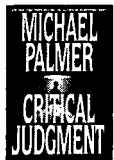
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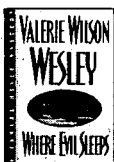
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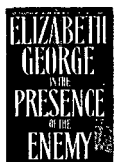
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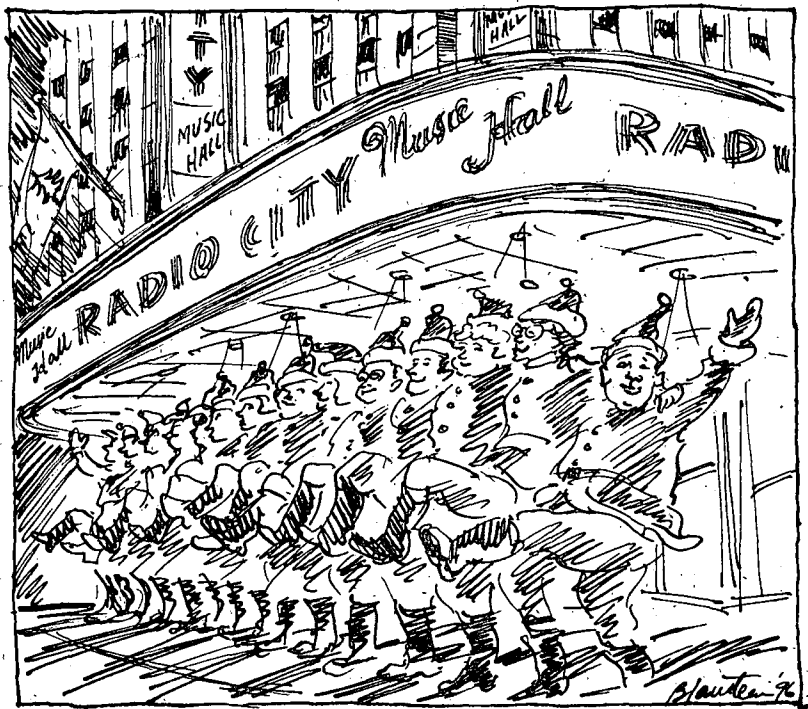
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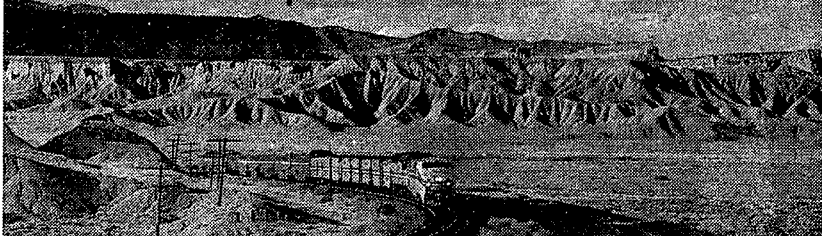
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Lord of Obstacles

Gregory Fallis



I don't have much to do with Protestant ministers, or clergy of any sort if I can help it. I'm Irish and Catholic as you can tell by my name—Kevin Sweeney. My wife, Mary Margaret, is also Irish and Catholic

and unlike me she takes both seriously, so I can't always avoid contact with priests and nuns. Protestant ministers, though, are another matter altogether. They're outside my usual circle.

Jails are part of my usual circle, and it was at the county jail that Joop Wheeler and I first met the Reverend Jason Hobart. A lot of priests and ministers visit jails and prisons during the holiday season. But Hobart wasn't there bringing cheer and the gospel to the inmates. He wasn't visiting at all. Hobart had been arrested for setting fire to his daughter's garage.

The three of us were crowded into a small, stale, interview room—me, Hobart, and my partner Joop. Hobart had been in jail over the weekend awaiting a bail hearing, and the time had worn at him. You could see he was normally a fastidious man, a man careful about his appearance, but a couple of nights in jail had played merry hell with his grooming. He was dirty and smelled of sweat and fear and worry.

It's never a pleasant place to be holding a conversation, the jail, and it's even worse during the Christmas season. The prisoners are more desperate and the atmosphere is made more depressing by the unrelentingly cheerful Christmas music piped over the public address system. But Joop and I had to be there. We wanted to talk to Hobart before his bail hearing. Hobart had a good lawyer—Kirby Abbott—and he was certain to be released. A man newly released

on bail has needs and interests that take priority over answering questions.

That's why Joop and I were there—to get answers to questions. Kirby Abbott, like I said, is a good lawyer, but even the best lawyer is limited by what his client tells him. Hobart, for some reason, wasn't being cooperative. He denied setting fire to his daughter's garage, but he'd refused to tell Kirby where he was at the time of the fire. That's why Kirby called us in. We're private investigators.

We do a lot of criminal defense work, Joop and I, but we rarely get a client like Jason Hobart. Before he took the cloth—if that's what Protestant ministers do—Hobart had been a successful local businessman; he owned several apartment buildings, two car dealerships, a local radio station, and probably a few other things. It made him an attractive client, for the lawyers and for us. We wouldn't any of us have to worry about collecting our fee.

When Joop and I sat down with Hobart, he repeated the story he'd told Kirby. He was innocent, he said, but he wouldn't say where he'd been when the fire started.

"It's a grand thing to be able to say you're innocent," I said. "Not many can do that. But it's not enough for the police, you

know, and it won't be enough for a jury if it goes to trial."

Reverend Hobart nodded, but he didn't seem concerned. He just seemed tired and sad. "A jury would do the right thing. The Lord will look out for me."

I looked at Joop and nodded toward Hobart. Joop's a Protestant—a Southern Baptist, of all things. Maybe he could talk some sense into the man.

"Juries are weird creatures," Joop said. "I suspect a jury would want to know where you were when your daughter's garage was torched. I'm *sure* a jury would want to know why your daughter Sarah—your daughter her ownself—told the police *you* were the one who chucked a Molotov cocktail through her garage window."

Joop's accent seemed to catch Hobart's attention for a moment. He's from South Carolina, Joop, and he has one of those slow, soft, cultured Southern accents. It seems almost exotic up here on the Massachusetts coast.

Hobart slowly shook his head, and there was real pain in his eyes. "Sarah," he said. "I don't know. I just can't believe she'd . . . Did she say she *saw* me setting fire to her garage? That she actually *saw* me?"

I shook my head. "No. What she told the police is that you'd

been threatening to burn down the garage for some time."

"Not the garage," Hobart said. "Not the garage, but what was inside it."

"The statue?" Joop asked.

"It's not just a statue," Hobart said. His eyes teared up. "It's an image of a pagan god. You have to understand, the idea of my daughter, my only child . . . my Sarah, worshiping graven images. Especially now, at this time of year. I just couldn't allow . . ." He wiped his eyes and shook his head.

"Graven images?" Joop said. "I thought it was an elephant." He flipped quickly through the notes Kirby Abbott had copied for us. "Uh, yeah, right here. Wooden statue of an elephant. Doesn't say a thing about any graven images."

Hobart shook his head. "It had the *head* of an elephant, but the body of a man. A man with four arms. It was a pagan god."

"Really?" Joop asked. "Here it just says an elephant."

"Well, I'm afraid it's wrong."

"Elephant or elephant god, it doesn't matter," I said. "What matters is that the police believe you threw a Molotov cocktail through your daughter's garage window, that you deliberately tried to destroy her statue and garage."

"Tried?" Hobart said. "I

thought . . . I was under the impression it had been destroyed."

"Nope," Joop said. "Just some minor damage is all. Singed around the edges."

Hobart looked up. "Are you talking about the statue? Or the garage?"

"Neither was badly damaged," I said. "At least that's what we were told. We haven't gone there to look yet."

Hobart shook his head. "I thought it . . . I thought the police said the statue had been destroyed."

"That's the problem with a Molotov cocktail, you know," Joop said. "You got almost no control over the results. If you go chucking Molotov cocktails through garage windows, you can't complain when the job doesn't get done."

"I've said I didn't do it," Hobart said. "I've told that to the police. I've told it to my lawyer, and I've told it to you. I—didn't—do—it."

"Well, there you go," Joop said. He turned to me. "He didn't do it. This is probably all just a simple mistake. Probably if we tell the police, they'll let him go."

It's impossible to keep Joop from joking around and I've given over trying, but someday the boy is going to get us fired. "It would help us if you'd tell us where you were at the time of the fire," I said to Hobart.

"I can tell you I wasn't at my daughter's house," he said wearily.

I nodded. "Yes, but why can't you tell us where you *were*? We know you weren't at your house. Your neighbors saw you drive away around seven P.M. We know the fire was extinguished around eight thirty, and we know you didn't return home until around eleven fifteen. What we don't know is where you were between seven and eleven fifteen."

"That was really bad timing, by the way," Joop said. "Coming home just when you did. Just as the police are knocking at your door to ask you questions. If you'd stayed away another fifteen, twenty minutes you probably wouldn't have had to spend the weekend in jail."

"Do you think you could find your way clear to tell us where you were?" I asked. "We're trying to help you, remember."

"I've already told Mr. Abbott," Hobart said. "I was doing the Lord's work."

I nodded. "Yes, I'm sure you were—but *where*?"

Hobart shook his head. "I can't tell you without breaking a confidence," he said. "All I can say—and all you need to know—is that I was doing the Lord's work."

"Doing the Lord's work may

get your earthly butt tossed in prison," Joop said.

"The Lord will take care of me," Hobart said.

"Well, then the Lord will have to take care of you in jail," Joop said.

Hobart glared at Joop.

"Mr. Hobart, Joop isn't always a tactful as he could be," I said. "But he's basically right. Unless we can show you weren't at your daughter's house that night, there's a good chance you'll be spending a lot more time behind bars."

Hobart sadly shook his head. "I'm sorry," he said. "I can't help you. I can't break a confidence." He looked up at me. "I assume you'll talk to my daughter?"

I nodded. "Probably. If she'll talk to us."

"When you see her, will you give her a message for me?" Hobart said. "Will you tell her I'm worried about her? About her soul? And will you tell her I love her?"

I shook my head. "I'll tell her you're worried about her and that you love her," I said. "But souls aren't our business. Dealing with the flesh is tough enough."

It was a relief to get out of the jail, away from the gloom and the wretched Christmas music. I like *real* Christmas music—the old carols and motets I heard in church when I was a boy. I don't

want to be hearing about snowmen and reindeer and mommy kissing Santa Claus.

Joop was cheerful as we drove away from the jail. "I think we ought to go take a peek at this statue thing," he said. "I think it's imperative is what it is." Joop takes an unhealthy pleasure in his work. I sometimes think the only reason he became a P.I. is so he'd have a legitimate reason for nosing around in other people's affairs.

"Okay," I said. "We need to interview the daughter. There's no reason we can't look at the garage and the statue at the same time."

"This is so cool," he said. "Four arms *and* an elephant head. Four arms would have been enough. But an elephant head, that's gravy. We didn't have anything like that at the First Ezekiel Baptist Church down home. We didn't have any statues at all. Hell, we didn't even have any *pictures*. Just plain white walls. Now my Aunt Cooter, she had a picture of . . ."

"You have an aunt named Cooter?"

"Well, her real name is Delma," Joop said. "And she's not really my aunt. But I've called her that all my life. I think she's really just a woman my . . ."

"I don't need to know your family history," I said. Joop has the strangest assortment of rel-

atives, and he's happy to talk about all of them. "I was just curious about her name."

"Right," Joop said. "Aunt Cooter, she's got this habit of pulling her head down between her shoulders, just like a cooter. Which is what we call a turtle down in Carolina. The point is that Cooter, she used to have a picture of Jesus on her living room wall. Maybe still does. At least she claimed it was Jesus. I'm not so sure my ownself. He sure didn't look very Jewish. This guy had pale white skin and a lot of long, semicurly blond hair and huge brown eyes. What he looked like, he looked like a spaniel who'd been whacked with a newspaper for wetting on the carpet. It wasn't what you'd call awe-inspiring. But it was one of those pictures where the eyes open and shut when you move. I used to stand there in Cooter's living room, shifting back and forth, making Jesus blink. Sarah Hobart has an elephant-headed god with four arms, and all I got was a cheesy painting of a spaniel-looking, blinking Jesus. What did you have?"

At St. Aloysius we have a statue of the Virgin. Some people say it weeps sometimes, though I've never talked to anybody who's actually seen it. I don't go to mass as often as I should—just now and then to please Mary Margaret. But I was raised Catholic, and that's something that can't be escaped. St. Aloysius is an old stone church built in 1829, a solid and imposing building, set in the ground like it grew there. When you walk inside, it puts you in your place; the stained-glass windows cutting the gloom, the dark pews, the altars, the warped wooden floors, the votive candles flickering off to the side. There's a darkness to it, and a sense of mystery. It's a house of worship, and the very building itself reminds you what worship means. I didn't say all that to Joop, of course—just that we had a statue of Mary that wept.

"You and Hobart's daughter, you got all the cool religious stuff," Joop said.

Sarah Hobart lived in an older part of town, a neighborhood of postwar brick houses, tall maple trees, big yards, and hedges to keep the nosy neighbors away. Not the sort of neighborhood where you'd expect a college student to live.

We arrived to find Sarah hauling a plastic trash bag to the garbage bin near the garage. We were probably lucky to find her at home. Sarah was a graduate student in history at the university, her father had told us, and she spent most of her waking hours on campus. Maybe there was a holiday break, though it

was still a couple of weeks until Christmas.

She turned to look at us as we got out of the car. "Are you the insurance guys?" She glanced at her wristwatch, then flashed us a smile that was an orthodontist's dream. "I'm really glad to see you. I didn't expect you so soon."

"I'm afraid we're not the insurance people," I said. "My name is Kevin Sweeney, and this is Joop Wheeler. We've just come from talking to your father at the jail."

Sarah's smile disappeared. "Oh no. Look, I don't want to hear any more Jesus crap." She tossed the trash in the bin and closed the lid with a bang. "Why don't you go bother somebody else. Go on, now. Take off."

Joop laughed. "No, no," he said. "We're not here for that. We're here about the fire. We're private investigators." He handed her a business card.

She took the card and looked us over. "Well, you don't look like my dad's usual missionaries. He's always sending people here, you know. Telling me I'm going to hell, just because I have a Ganesha in the studio."

"A Ganesha?" Joop asked.

"Yeah," Sarah nodded. "You know, the Hindu god? The Lord of Obstacles? The elephant-headed god?"

"Ah," Joop said, smiling. "That Ganesha."

"You're *sure* you're not one of my dad's Jesus buddies?" Sarah asked. "You're not going to get on your knees and pray for me? Because I hate that."

"Scout's honor," Joop said, holding up his hand in the Boy Scout pledge. "The last time I was on my knees I was throwing up. We're just here to ask a few questions and look at the damage. With your permission, of course."

Sarah's smile gradually found its way back. "You're from the South," she said.

"Yes, ma'am, I surely am from the South," he said. "Georgetown County, South Carolina. Which is only just a wink away from heaven."

Joop was laying it on thick, and I knew we were in. People in New England are saps for a cultured Southern accent. We've worked this routine many times before, Joop and I. He chats and charms and asks questions while I nose around in the background. It works well for us.

"Tell me about this Ganesha," Joop said. "Can we see it?"

Sarah hesitated for a moment, then shrugged. "Why not?" she said. "It's right over here in the studio."

The "studio" was the garage. The main garage door had been

sealed shut, and the small building had been converted into a single large room.

"The original owner used to have a potter's wheel and a kiln out here," Sarah said. "I kept my loom out here for a while, but luckily I moved it inside the house a few days before the fire. It's just too cold to weave out here in the winter."

The fire damage was mainly limited to the west wall, but as with most small fires the firefighters had done nearly as much damage as the fire itself. The fire had burned some two by four studs and joists, but not enough to weaken the wall or ceiling. The floor of the garage was littered with bits of wood, broken glass, and big lumps of sodden pink insulation. The insulation had probably been pulled down by firefighters searching for concealed fire in the roof. Three of the four garage windows were broken. Two of the windows had probably been broken by firefighters to vent the heat and smoke; the third would have been broken by the Molotov cocktail. Everything in the garage was coated with an oily black layer of soot and grime left by the smoke.

On a wooden workbench by the west wall, near one of the broken windows, was the statue that had apparently sparked this whole event. It was about

two feet tall, carved out of some dark wood. It was an odd-looking thing—the body of a chubby man with four arms and, just as everybody had said, the head of an elephant. The figure seemed to be swaying as if he were dancing. There was something graceful about the statue, and despite the fire damage it was attractive. Whoever had carved it had managed to make the elephant head look like it was smiling. Aside from a couple of spots at the base of the statue—the parts where the gasoline from the Molotov cocktail had pooled—it wasn't badly damaged at all.

"Cute little bugger, isn't he," Joop said. "Why do you keep him out here in the gara . . . in the studio?"

Sarah gave an embarrassed shrug. "Well, he doesn't really go with my decor."

Joop nodded as though he understood the difficulty of incorporating Hindu gods into the decor. He reached out and touched the statue. "He's only got one tusk. What happened? He get in a fight?"

Sarah smiled. "The legend is that Ganesha broke off his other tusk and threw it at the moon," she said. "He was angry with the moon, but I don't remember why."

"Threw it at the moon," Joop said. "Did he hit it?"

Sarah laughed and said she didn't know.

The wooden workbench on which the statue sat was charred. It was far more damaged from the fire than the statue itself. Bits of bottle glass were scattered across the surface—presumably from the Molotov cocktail. The larger pieces of the broken bottle would have been seized by the fire investigators, who'd test it to find out exactly what sort of fuel was in it.

Joop was still examining the statue. "What's he got in his hands?" he asked.

"That's a radish," Sarah said, pointing at one of the statue's hands. "And there, that's a bowl of sweets. And over there, a lotus blossom. And down there by his feet? That's his rat."

"His *rat*?" Joop asked. "Ganesha has his own personal rat?"

"Yeah," she said, laughing. "He rides it."

"He *rides* it?" Joop said. "He rides a rat?"

"It's better than most Indian mass transit," Sarah said.

I examined the broken window on the wall nearest the statue. There was broken glass on the floor beneath the window, which made sense if a Molotov cocktail had been thrown through it. I went to look at the other windows.

"You called him the Lord of

Obstacles," Joop said. "What does that mean?"

"Hindus believe Ganesha helps them overcome obstacles." Sarah'd learned that academic tone of voice, the one professors use—disinterested and lofty, but oh so enlightened. "Ganesha is worshiped at the beginning of any new undertaking, especially a risky one. He's also the god of foresight and prosperity."

Joop nodded. "Sort of an all-purpose god," he said. "A god for the nineties."

Sarah laughed. "That's right. Works hard, plays hard. Ganesha's also known for his sense of humor and love of dancing."

"Are you . . . have you become a Hindu?" Joop asked. Then he smiled shyly. He has a grand shy smile, Joop, and he uses it with great effect. "I hope you don't mind my asking. It's none of my business. I'm just being nosy."

"I don't mind," Sarah said, smiling back. "My dad, he thinks I've converted. And maybe I let him believe I did. Just to make him mad, you know? No, I'm not a Hindu. But my dad thinks just having Ganesha around puts my soul at risk. Whatever that means. He's so provincial. When he first saw it, I thought he'd have a stroke. He told me to get rid of

it or he'd cut me off. Can you believe it?"

There were fewer shards of glass beneath the other two windows. Probably the firefighters had broken them from the inside, so most of the glass would have fallen outside the window. The glass under each of the three windows was covered with the same oily soot that covered the entire interior of the garage. I rummaged through my jacket pockets until I found an old bank deposit envelope. I picked up a piece of broken glass from under each of the three windows and put them all in the envelope.

"It's a lovely piece of work," Joop said, touching Ganesha's soot-covered trunk. "Where did you get it?"

"I got it in India," she said. "I talked my dad into letting me go to India last summer. I'm doing my thesis on the Sepoy Mutiny. While I was doing my research, I found this Ganesha in a market near a town called Cawnpore and just had to buy it. Got it for about sixty-two hundred rupees."

"What is that in American money?"

"About a hundred and eighty dollars," she said. "That's a fortune in some parts of India. People are so poor there. They're so poor their priests sometimes have to sell off religious artifacts

to buy food." She nodded toward the Ganesha.

"Your daddy gave you a summer in India?" Joop asked. "Nice guy."

She shrugged. "He can afford it."

"And when you said your daddy was threatening to cut you off," Joop said, "did you mean cut you off financially?"

Sarah made a face. "It's crazy, isn't it? Just because I brought this statue home with me. He's been weird like that ever since Mom died. He was normal up to that point. Well, not *normal*, but more normal than he is now. He used to spend all his time working and we hardly ever saw him, but at least when we did see him he didn't spend all his time talking about Jesus. Then Mom died and Dad found Jesus. And if that wasn't bad enough, he went and became a minister. Now he spends all his time doing church stuff. First it was his job, now it's Jesus. It was never Mom, never me."

"Your daddy, did he help you buy this house?" Joop asked.

Sarah shook her head. "No, that was my mom. She grew up in this neighborhood. Just a couple of blocks from here. She left me some money when she died. Not enough to buy the house outright, but it made the payments reasonable."

“I’m going to take a look around outside,” I said.

Joop nodded but kept his attention on Sarah—and kept Sarah’s attention on him. “Tell me about your thesis,” he said. “What’s this Sepoy Mutiny business? What’s a sepoy? And what about the mutiny? I love a good mutiny.”

The outside of the garage told the same story as the inside. A little bit of broken glass under the west window indicating it had broken inward and more broken glass under the other two, indicating they’d been broken outward. It seemed pretty clear what had happened. I went to the car, found another envelope, and put a piece of glass from each of the three windows into it.

Joop and Sarah were still talking about her thesis when I returned.

“Let me see if I understand this,” Joop said. “You’re saying this whole mutiny business might have been avoided if the British had been more sensitive to their Hindu and Muslim soldiers?”

She nodded. “That’s right. There were rumors that the British were using pig and cow fat to grease their rifle cartridges. Those things are forbidden to observant Hindus and Muslims. But rather than try to dispel the rumors—and they

were only rumors—the British tried to force the soldiers to use the cartridges. It didn’t work. The sepoys mutinied instead.”

Joop turned to me. “Sweeney, you got to hear this.” He turned back to Sarah. “Sweeney’s Irish; he hates the British.”

“I don’t hate Brits,” I said. “Just their army. Maybe you can tell me about this mutiny later. We should be going. Have you asked all your questions?”

Joop turned to Sarah. “Have I asked you enough questions?” And he gave her one of those smiles. He’s a terrible flirt, Joop.

She beamed back at him. “Oh, I think so.”

“Okay, then,” Joop said. He shook her hand. “Thanks for . . . oh, wait. Your daddy. I never asked about your daddy.”

Sarah’s smile disappeared. “What about him?” she asked.

“You told the police he’d threatened to burn down the garage. The studio, I mean. Now, just when did he say that?”

“Just about every time we talked since I got back from India,” she said. “He’d go on about my soul and about graven images, then he’d say if I didn’t get rid of the Ganesha he would. I think he even said something about cleansing by fire.”

XX

"Ah," Joop said. "And where were you when the fire started?"

"I was supposed to be on campus," she said. "But I wasn't feeling well, so I cut my class. Lucky for me I did. If I hadn't come home then, the whole studio probably would have burned down."

"Can I give you some advice?" I said to Sarah.

She hesitated a moment. "Sure."

"Don't clean this place up yet. Even if the insurance people tell you it's okay to clean it up, wait a week or two before touching anything. Just to be safe. You wouldn't want anything to screw up your insurance settlement."

Sarah indicated the broken windows. "But what if it snows?"

"Put plastic over the windows," I said. "But I wouldn't touch anything else. They're strange people, insurance types, and you can't be too careful."

"Okay," she said. "Okay, thanks."

As we drove away, Joop started to scribble some notes. He likes to act the fool, but he's a good, thorough investigator. "Smart kid," he said. "Hates her daddy, but basically a nice kid. What did you think?"

I shrugged. "She was nice enough," I said.

"Religion is so weird," Joop said. "Everybody's so certain they are right and everybody

else is wrong. Hobart's afraid his daughter will go to hell because she's got a Ganesha stashed in a converted garage. Sarah is pissed at her daddy because she thinks he cares more about Jesus than about her. A hundred and forty years ago a whole bunch of folks in India died on account of the British didn't have any respect for Hindus or Muslims. My Aunt Cooter's Jesus looks more like an Episcopalian than a Jew. And who knows what you Catholics are up to?"

"Joop, take a Prozac," I said. "We can leave religion out of this. We've got something better than religion. We've got evidence."

"Evidence? Of what?"

"Of who set the fire," I said.

"What are you talking about?" Joop asked. Then he started to grin. "Wait a minute. You found something, didn't you?"

"I found something," I said, then concentrated on my driving.

"Well?" Joop asked. "You going to tell me about it?"

I handed him the two envelopes, which he opened gingerly.

"It's glass," he said.

"Clever lad yourself."

Joop waited for me to explain. When I didn't, he shook his head. "You're not going to tell me, are you?"

"Well, that's not quite right," Joop said, pointing at the shards. "The glass from outside the garage only has that oily smoke stuff on one side. The

glass from inside has the smoke on both sides."

"So what?" Kirby said. "What does that mean?"

"Damned if I know," Joop said.

"It means the statue of Ganesha was . . ."

"Ganēsha?" Kirby asked.

"Ganesha is your basic four-armed, elephant-headed Lord of Obstacles," Joop informed him. "The Hindu god of foresight and prosperity."

Kirby still looked confused.

"The statue that got itself burnt," Joop said.

"I see," Kirby said. "Right. Ganesha."

"These bits of glass show the statue was on fire before the Molotov cocktail was thrown through the garage window," I said.

Kirby looked at the glass again. "How is that possible?" he asked. "And how can you tell from these bits of glass?"

I pointed to the glass. "If an object is thrown through a window, what happens to the glass? It breaks and falls on the floor, right?"

"I think we all grasp the basic concept of gravity," Kirby said. He can get snotty at times, Kirby.

"And if the object that broke the window starts a fire, we'll get smoke. Right?"

"We understand gravity and combustion," Kirby said.

"And what happens to the glass on the floor?" I asked. "It gets covered with smoke. But it only gets covered on the one side. The side that's up. The side that's against the floor stays clean."

Joop grinned and clapped his hands. "I get it," he said.

Kirby cocked his head like a dog that's heard a sound it doesn't understand. He pointed to the glass shards that had come from inside the garage. "Then why do these pieces of glass have smoke on both sides?"

"There's only one explanation," I said. "The Molotov cocktail didn't start the fire. The fire had to be burning *before* the window was broken. The inner side of the window was covered with oily smoke, then the bottle was thrown through the window, the glass was shattered, and the other side of the glass was covered with smoke."

Kirby was nodding. "Okay. So the fire was going before the Molotov cocktail broke the window. But why does that prove Reverend Hobart didn't do it?" He turned to Hobart. "This is purely a theoretical question, you understand. I'm not doubting you when you say you're innocent." They're marvelous creatures, lawyers, always willing to give their clients the benefit of the doubt.

"It doesn't make any sense," I

said. "Hobart's got a motive for tossing a Molotov cocktail through the garage window—he's worried about his daughter's soul. But there isn't any reason for him to break into the garage, set fire to the statue, then go outside and throw a Molotov cocktail through the window."

"But who *would* have a reason to do that?" Hobart asked.

"Your daughter," Joop said.

"Sarah?" Hobart asked. "Why?"

"On account of she's sincerely pissed off at you," Joop said. "She feels you neglected her and her mother. First with your work, then with your church."

"And for the insurance money," I said. "Sarah was expecting the insurance people when Joop and I arrived. I assume the garage was covered in her insurance policy?"

"The garage *and* the statue," Kirby said. He searched through his briefcase and pulled out some notes. "The statue was insured for eight thousand dollars."

"Bingo," Joop said. "Sarah only paid a touch over six thousand rupees for the little guy. That's a hundred and eighty American dollars. With one simple move Sarah gets back at her daddy *and* picks up some serious cash."

"But why would she need

money?" Hobart asked. "I've got plenty of money. If she needed something, all she would have had to do is ask."

"You were threatening to cut her off unless she got rid of the statue," I said.

Hobart hung his head.

"She has a thesis to write," Joop said. "You can't study the religious implications of the Sepoy Mutiny when you're worried about making the house payments, you know."

Hobart looked up. "It still doesn't make sense. I thought she worshiped the statue. Why would she burn it?"

Joop shook his head. "Naw, she doesn't worship it. She just thinks it looks cool. Sarah's no Hindu. She's just a kid who's pissed off at her daddy."

"It all fits," I said. "She even moved her loom out of the garage a few days before the fire. I'd call that suspicious."

"The loom," Hobart said. "That was her mother's loom." He looked miserable, poor guy. He was beginning to believe it.

"It would have been easy for her to do," I continued. "The days are short now, so she could do it in the cover of darkness."

"Not that she needed the dark," Joop said. "Her house is surrounded by those big hedges. So there wasn't anybody who could see her in mid-Molotov cocktail toss."

“And isn’t it an odd coincidence that she returned home at just the right moment?” I said. “Just in time to call in the fire department? The garage and the statue were probably damaged more than she’d have liked, but even so, the damage was minimal.”

Hobart closed his eyes and put his face in his hands. I could see his lips moving. He was praying, I suppose. He had good reason to.

Kirby looked at his watch. “Well, this certainly changes things. We’ll need to talk to the district attorney before the bail hearing,” he said. “If we turn this information over to the D.A., there’s a chance he’ll dismiss the charges at the bail hearing.”

Hobart looked up. “But what will happen to Sarah?”

Kirby stammered for a moment. He seemed to have forgotten that Sarah was Hobart’s daughter. “Uh, well, uh, I’m not entirely . . .”

“She could be arrested,” I said. Hobart had a right to know. “She could be charged with obstructing justice and filing a false police report, but that’s small beans. Sarah’s biggest problem is with attempting to defraud the insurance company out of eight thousand dollars. That’s a felony.”

“But at least she wouldn’t be

charged with arson,” Kirby said. “It’s not illegal to burn up something you own.”

Hobart shook his head. “No, I won’t have my daughter arrested,” he said. “I won’t have her charged with a crime. I’d . . . I’d rather plead guilty. Can I do that at this bail hearing?”

Kirby seemed stunned. “Plead guilty?”

“If I pled guilty, would I be required to do it under oath?” Hobart asked.

Kirby held up his hands. “Wait, wait. Let’s just deal with the bail hearing. We don’t have to go to the district attorney with this information immediately. Let’s get you out of jail first, then we can figure out what to do.”

Hobart started to speak, but there was a sharp knock on the door and one of the corrections officers put his head in. “Sorry,” he said. “Mr. Abbott, you have a phone call. And the deputies are here to take your client to court for his bail hearing.”

“Damn,” Kirby said. “Damn, damn. Sweeney, come with me and explain all this one more time.”

I nodded and started to follow Kirby out the door. I held the door open for Joop.

“Go ahead on,” Joop said. “I’ve got something I want to say to the Rev here.”

I hesitated. I wasn’t sure it

was a good idea for Joop to talk to Reverend Hobart alone. As I've said, he's not always as diplomatic as he could be. But he'd already turned toward Hobart and started talking, so I left them alone.

While Kirby and I walked to the telephone, I explained the glass and smoke to him once again. He understood it well enough; he was just being careful, which is why he's a good lawyer.

Joop caught up with us a few minutes later. He was grinning like a lord's bastard. He held out his hand.

"I need to borrow your car," he said. "Kirby can give you a lift back to the office after the bail hearing."

"What's going on?" I asked.

Joop smiled. "I'll tell you when I get back to the office."

"Joop Wheeler, you're a rat bastard." But turnabout is fair play—I'd made him wait for the smoke and glass explanation. I gave him my car keys, but I didn't like it.

We had to wait half an hour for the bail hearing. It was a half hour made miserable by still more tacky Christmas music. A holly, jolly Christmas, indeed. I thought about finding the Clerk of Court and complaining about the separation of Church and State, but nobody could seriously claim *that* music

had anything to do with religion.

When we finally got into the courtroom, the hearing only took about ten minutes. The courts don't keep people like Jason Hobart in jail awaiting trial. If you have money, you walk. It's not right, but there it is and the whole world knows it.

After the hearing Hobart borrowed Kirby's cellular telephone and went off to a quiet corner to make a call. He came back a few minutes later, looking somber.

"Chet Wilkins," he said.

"Who is Chet Wilkins?" Kirby asked.

"It's who I was with when Sarah . . . when her garage caught fire," Hobart said. "I was at his house, praying with him. Chet is one of the deacons of my church. He's just tested positive for HIV."

"And you were with him that night?" Kirby asked. "He's willing to testify to that?"

Hobart nodded. "He'd rather not, but he will if it's necessary. You can see why I couldn't tell you where I was. There are some members of our church—maybe most of them—who wouldn't understand. They think AIDS is God's curse. Chet's a good man. He's made some mistakes, but he sincerely wants to get right with God."

Kirby looked at him for a mo-

ment. "Come on, let's get out of here," he said. "I'll take you home."

"Could you take me to Sarah's house?" Hobart asked. "I have a lot to make up for. If I'm not too late." He smiled sadly. "But I can't believe I'm too late. I don't think God would do that to me. I think the Lord set all this up, to show me what's important in my life. I told you the Lord would take care of me."

Kirby nodded. He wasn't comfortable with all the talk about God. Nor was I, for that matter. Catholics don't talk about God like He's the neighbor down the street. "Yeah, sure," he said. "Let's go."

Rather than tag along to Hobart's reunion with his daughter, I took a cab back to the office. The cabbie had Christmas music on his radio, so I was nearly murderous by the time I got there.

I'd been there just long enough for the teapot to come to a boil when Joop came in. He was carrying the scorched Hindu statue from Sarah Hobart's studio/garage.

"What's that?" I asked.

"Ganesha," Joop said. "You remember. The Lord of Obstacles."

"Yes, but what are you doing with it?"

"I bought it," he said.

"You what?"

"Bought it. Which word didn't you understand?"

"You bought it? How much?"

"Eight thousand American dollars," he said. "That's what it was insured for."

I stared at him. "Are you mad? Where did you get eight thousand dollars?"

"From Hobart," he said. "He said we could bill him."

"So that's what you cooked up with Hobart," I said. "Am I right in thinking Sarah will now cancel her insurance claim?"

Joop nodded. "It was the only logical solution," he said. "Hobart didn't want his little Sarah to lose her soul. And he didn't want her to commit insurance fraud. And Sarah wanted the cash to finish her thesis. This way everybody's happy."

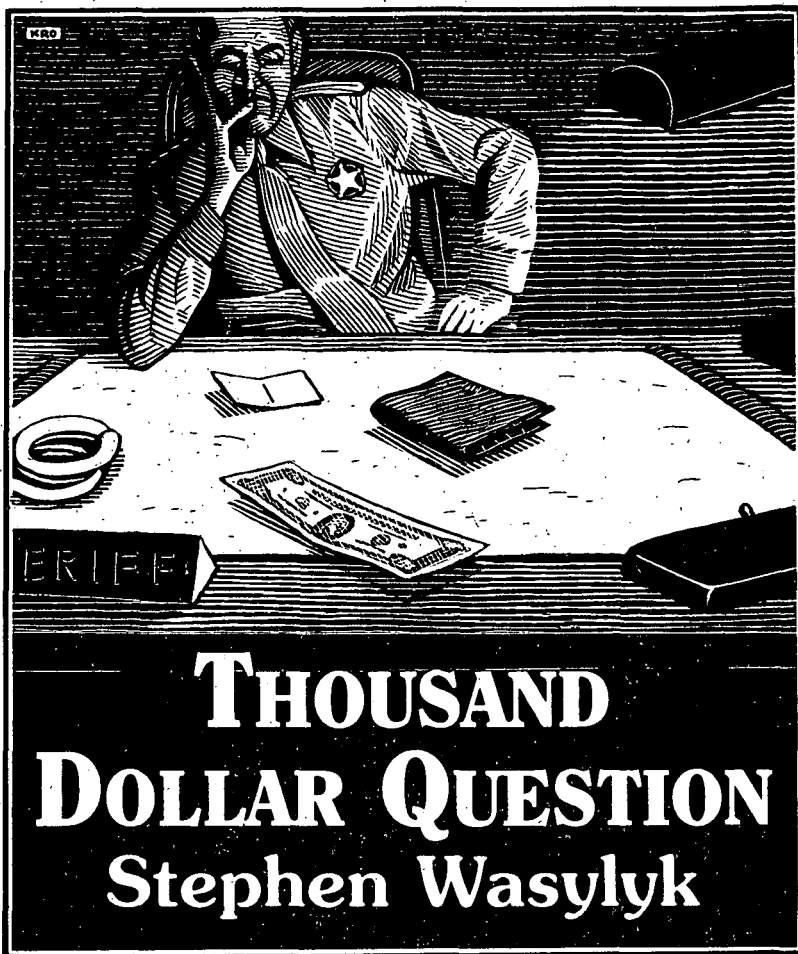
He was awfully full of himself. But I had to admit, it was a neat solution.

"What are you going to do with it?" I asked.

"I'm going to clean the little booger up," Joop said. "He's not that badly damaged."

"And then what?"

"Then I'm going to put him in that corner," he said, pointing. "Sweeney, bud, if there's any folks in the world who need a god to clear away obstacles, it's us private detectives."



THOUSAND DOLLAR QUESTION

Stephen Wasylyk

The man on the stretcher hadn't made a sound or fluttered an eyelid since he'd been found lying alongside his car in the parking lot of the roadhouse. Depressed skull fracture, the local hospital said, too

much for them to handle.

County Sheriff Ben Bennis watched the running lights of the medevac helicopter approach through the early morning darkness, rotor blades pounding hard as it neared the

spotlighted landing pad. In a half hour the man would be on the operating table at the huge medical center down the valley where they had the equipment and the skills to repair almost every sort of damage the human body might suffer. They might even save his life.

Ben hoped so. The man's hair was gray, but the rest of him had weathered the years well. A few liver spots on his hands, but aside from the firm creases from nose to mouth, his face was relatively unlined, body well muscled. Hell, he was in better shape than Ben, who had thinned on top and thickened through the middle—age responsible for one, Emily's cooking for the other.

At the moment all they knew was the man's name. Lawrence T. Curtis.

Not what he was doing here in this farm, orchard, and tourist-oriented upstate county—just another fisherman or vacationer, or taking a hiatus from the interstate to admire the mountainous scenery? Or why he was at a sleazy roadhouse named the Rundayvoo, how he'd suffered the blow to his head, or even why—if it had been a mugging—his wallet hadn't been taken. If Curtis survived and suffered no lasting brain damage, some answers might be forthcoming, but if he died, a serious problem had

been created by what the church folk called "that den of iniquity"—a quaint description, but fitting.

But possibly giving Ben, at last, the reason he needed to close down the damned Rundayvoo. The place generated half the calls to his office.

The chopper felt for the pad and squatted, the stretcher already on its way. An EMS tech helped slide the injured man aboard, scrambled in after him, and spotted Ben at the edge of the light. Ben held his left hand to his ear and simulated dialing with his right. The tech grinned and gave him a thumbs up.

Lou Merlinsky. Good hard-working kid. Due to enter medical school in the fall.

The chopper rose and hovered briefly as if to be sure all was well before the nose dipped and it plunged into the night.

Down near the end of his spine, a hot coal flared to life as Ben shuffled around the building to the parking lot, dragging a plastic trash bag containing Curtis's clothes.

Ironic that his back had been thrown out that morning when he'd bent from his chair to pick up a dropped sheet of paper, instead of by something more dramatic like wrestling with a desperate criminal.

Sheer agony had frozen him into a piece of neo-sculpture en-

titled *Man with Slipped Disc*—eyeballs popping, body covered with a film of cold sweat.

Leo had come over. "Need help?"

Spit out between clenched teeth, Ben's "TOUCH . . . ME . . . AND . . . I'LL . . . KILL . . . YOU!" gave his just-hired investigator a clue that he shouldn't even try.

Very ignominious for the respected county sheriff to be transported in an ambulance, chair and all, to the emergency room. And downright embarrassing, even humiliating, for a sixty-year-old man who'd never been sick a day in his life to have a young female doctor, after X-rays and the conclusion that his body hadn't really snapped in two, bare his ancient buttocks to the world and give him a shot, a prescription for a painkiller, and the advice to go home and sit in a Jacuzzi, as though Jacuzzis were standard in the homes of underpaid county sheriffs.

He threw the bag into the front seat of his Bronco, sparking a stab of pain in his lower back that radiated down his legs as he drove.

He'd torn up the prescription because he never took pills and stopped at the drugstore for a sacroiliac belt. Strapping it on after a soaking—in his perfectly ordinary bathtub—he felt like

an aging male film star concealing a potbelly, but the belt got him through the rest of the day and to his bed, where he gratefully stretched out until Leo's midnight call about Curtis Damned Rondayvoo again.

Socks in hand, he'd stared at his bare feet, wondering if he could get them on without destroying himself. He'd have hated being dressed like an infant, but Emily could have slipped them on if she hadn't been at that seminar on her new hobby—the occult. All around us every day, Ben, she said. Sure. Maybe he could conjure up a ghost nanny.

Better be sure to wear the belt, he told himself. Five minutes later, his mind on Leo's call, he'd walked out without it. Welcome to the World of Disintegrating Memory Cells. Next step, drooling in your sleep.

The only visible life on the dark streets of the county seat, he pulled into his parking slot before the sheriff's office a block from the courthouse, gingerly descended, and dragged the bag of clothing up the steps and into the office, where he released it in front of Leo Hansen's desk as he shuffled toward his corner office.

Leo, six two with flowing blond hair and mustache, could have been a stand-in for one of his ancestors who once stormed

the beaches of Ireland to rape, rob, and pillage. He eyed the dark green bag.

"Thanks, Ben. What I always wanted. My very own bag of trash."

"When you make jokes, always be sure you have your next job lined up. What you have there is the man's clothes. If he lives, send them down to him. If he doesn't, take them to the state police lab."

Hands braced on his desktop, he carefully lowered himself into his chair. The hot coal burned. He should have worn the belt. He should have had the prescription filled. He should have personally blown up the Rundayvoo a long time ago.

He leaned back. "Tell me what you've been doing to justify my hiring you, other than dream up hilarious one-liners for your Comedy Channel debut."

"Nothing new. He'd left the bar and was at his car when he was bashed. Found a footprint of a dress shoe in the mud where the gravel had been worn away. Looks to me like a thin-soled Italian style. Rundayvoo patrons are sneaker, workshoe, and boot types. I'll make a cast in the morning when I can see what I'm doing. Found a man named Walters who noticed three others arguing in the parking lot. No description. No lights except the neon sign, and half of that is

out. He considered calling us, but fights and arguments in the parking lot are routine out there. Freddie should be able to give us names—"

"Did the others bring you up to date on him?"

"Not a candidate for church elder, is he?"

"Even the Baptists won't go near Freddie the Foot, and they believe anyone can be saved. He's big and he's mean and he's a one-man information center for the criminally inclined in three states. If you want to buy, sell, or negotiate anything illegal, see Freddie at the Rundayvoo, which is spelled phonetically so his semiliterate clientele know they have the right place. I can't close him down because I've never been able to prove anything, and he draws enough honest folk willing to risk ptomaine or salmonella for food, beer, dancing, and a little romance. He'll tell the truth only when it doesn't matter to him."

Leo grinned. "I guess that's why he said two cretins—his word—named Morrissey had had a few words with Curtis earlier. Curtis was drinking beer and minding his own business when the brothers started to give him a hard time, maybe because he wasn't local. Freddie told them to knock it off or go drink elsewhere. That was the end of it. Maybe. They could have waited

outside. Could explain the three men Walters saw."

The Morrissey brothers. Big and muscular and hardworking enough to wrench a living from the small farm they'd inherited, but with the equivalent of one good brain between them. Short-changed mentally, they'd been compensated with incredible strength and quickness. Harmless, though, unless some fool thought it great sport to insult or ridicule them.

"Possible, but bashing someone with a blunt object isn't the Morrissey style. Their fists are enough. About the blunt object. The depression in Curtis's skull is wide and round, so look for something like a fist-sized rock."

Ben pulled out the wallet. "Right now you're my witness while I count this money."

There were eight twenties, three tens, four fives, six ones—and one thousand dollar bill, crisp and new.

Leo pointed at the thousand dollar bill. "Bit suspicious, don't you think? You couldn't find another of those within a hundred miles. Wouldn't have found this one if whoever hit him had known he had it, but maybe they had no chance to look."

Irritation joined Ben's nagging pain. Suspicious was right. Why in the hell would a man have a thousand dollar bill in this day of credit cards? It creat-

ed a whole new set of questions he could have done without. Unless he put it down as possible casino winnings, turned it over to Curtis or his heirs, and forgot the whole thing.

"Speculation is the ruination of good police work. Search his clothes. We still haven't found his car keys."

Ben fanned out the cards from the wallet—Pennsylvania driver's license; car registration. No credit cards? Everyone had credit cards. No health insurance I.D.? (The medical center would scream.) No ATM card? Realistically, the wallet contents were as borderline for an average citizen as the thousand dollar bill.

He fingered the driver's license, felt and peeled away a white card which heat and humidity had adhered to the plastic back. Something that did make sense. The person to be notified was Lawrence T. Curtis, Jr. No address. Just a phone number, area code 215. Philadelphia vicinity. He tucked the card into his shirt pocket. He'd wait until he heard from the medical center before calling. The news would be either good or bad, but certainly definite.

Dropping a plastic sandwich bag containing a handful of coins on the desk, Leo dangled two keys on a ring before him. "Inside coat pocket. Strange

place to carry car keys, even for a showroom-new Caddie. And this." Leo handed him a slip of paper, RONDAYVOO lettered in caps. "Tells us he didn't stroll into the place for a beer. What it doesn't tell us is why. Maybe we should ask Freddie."

"Freddie wouldn't tell us the time if we pushed a clock under his nose. Search the car—"

"Maybe that big bill means drugs?"

"Stop thinking Hollywood style. Everything doesn't always have to be drugs. Wear gloves. Like the clothes, we may have to send it to the state police, and since we don't have an impound yard, bring it in, and park it out front so we can keep an eye on it. That's the least we can do for Curtis if he's just an unwary tourist."

Ben locked the wallet and bag in a desk drawer. "Two hours until daylight. I'm going home for breakfast." And the sacroiliac belt. "If that note is missing when I get back, make sure you've had a good head start. In the meantime, have someone call motels to see if he's registered."

He levered himself upward gingerly as his phone rang.

Lou's young voice. "Anyone call you about Curtis?"

"Never has been one of their priorities. That's why I gave you the signal. How's he doing?"

"The operation went well. He's in recovery. His son is here—"

"His son?"

"I assumed you called him."

Not, unless I used subconscious telepathy.

"Right now I imagine his only concern is his father's condition, but just mention that I'd like to speak to him."

"Okay. I'll call if Curtis's condition changes."

Ben shuffled out, telling Leo to have the Morrissey brothers brought in anyway. "Use two cars and keep them separated so they can't talk to each other."

Stomach heavy from rubbery eggs, burnt toast, and weak coffee, the belt tight around his hips, he shuffled back into the office along with the dawn. The belt did nothing to ease the nagging pain but was an excellent reminder to make no sudden moves.

Leo was out at the scene. The younger Morrissey, Kermit, loomed in the unlocked holding cell, his brother George tucked away in the interrogation cubicle.

No mistaking the relationship. Black hair, simian stance, leaning slightly forward but still well over six feet tall, heavy sloping shoulders, hirsute arms, craggy brows, and prominent lower jaws, both outfitted in

XXXL shirts and jeans.

He crooked a finger at Kermit and pointed at the chair beside his desk.

The chair protested. So did Kermit. "Why'd you bring us here, Sheriff Ben? We done nothing."

Ben noted the eyes shifting and the tongue wetting the lips. Lying requires some intelligence or cunning, neither of which the Morrisseys possessed to any degree.

"Freddie says you and George had an argument with that old man last night."

"Was nothing. George went to the bar to get us a couple of beers, and the old man called him an ape. Said he must have escaped from a zoo."

Translated, Kermit was saying that George had pushed up to the crowded bar, parting the patrons with the gentleness of a bulldozer and probably spilling drinks. Curtis had used the wrong word when he complained.

Resentment made Kermit's voice rise. "Wasn't very nice, Sheriff Ben. Couldn't let that pass, no way, but Freddie told us to go sit down. So we did."

"Waited for him outside, though."

The eyes darted around the room. "We never."

"Sure you did. A man saw three people arguing."

"Weren't us."

Ben rose and motioned him back into the holding cell. "Wait in there while I talk to George."

In the interrogation room, massive forearms and hands on the table, George looked up at him. "No call to take us from our work, Sheriff Ben."

"You won't get to it for a long time, George, if you don't tell me how that old man got hurt."

"Heard someone hit him with something. You know we'd never do that."

Ben took a step, felt a lightning bolt of pain. He grasped the back of a chair for support. "George, the man may die. Now, I know neither of you intended great harm. You wanted to teach him what you call a lesson, but you or Kermit did wrong, and you should stand up to it. Now, which one hit him? And with what?"

George looked down at his big hands. Ben shifted. The stabbing pain persisted.

"Guess you're right, Sheriff Ben," George said slowly. "Daddy always said to stand up and take what's coming to you. Only wanted to correct his bad manners. We told him the least he could do was 'pologize for calling us names, but that beer he drunk put him on the feisty side. Told us to go swing from a tree somewhere or he'd break our necks. Started dancin'."

around with his hands up like those karate guys on TV. Didn't help him none. I bopped him. Not hard 'cause he was old. He goes down, and we go home. Only hit him with my fist, sort of gentle, and that's the truth."

"You didn't hit him with a rock?"

George held up an enormous fist. "Don't need no rock. Could be he hitten his head on one. We din't look."

Not really settled, and there was still that big bill.

Ben patted his shoulder. "Thanks for telling me, George. I'm sending you home. Get your work done, come back, and we'll talk to the county attorney. But before you go, did the man do anything besides drink beer? Like maybe talk to someone?"

"Just sat there. Oney one he talken to was Freddie. Seen him show him something."

He radioed Leo to tell him what George had said.

"Could be, Ben, but all we found under his head was gravel. I made a cast of the footprint. Very interesting. I doubt even the lawyers in this town make enough money to buy Italian shoes."

"I'm sure they're working on it."

Ben gingerly lowered himself into his chair, retrieved the thousand dollar bill, and called Aaron Parsons, manager of the

local branch of one of the state's largest banks.

"Aaron, I have in front of me a brand new thousand dollar bill. I'd call the Treasury Department, but I don't feel like spending the morning on hold. Where might it have come from?"

Aaron laughed. "Not my bank. If I needed big bills, and I can't imagine why, I'd have to order them from one of our big branches. Banking today is ten times more paper than cash . . ." Aaron paused. "Uh-oh. Hold it, Ben."

Ben heard papers rustling.

Aaron asked, "What's the number?"

Ben read it off.

"Stolen. Part of the loot from an armored car holdup in Philadelphia three days ago. Three masked men. Two with guns and a getaway car driver. No descriptions."

"You're sure?"

"You know how it works. Whenever serial numbers are available, the FBI circulates them throughout the banking system, hoping a thief will be dumb enough to pass one of the bills. I generally don't pay much attention to lists from holdups hundreds of miles away because it isn't likely any would turn up in our little backwater metropolis, but your bill is on the one that came in the other day. Looks like you made the big

time. Better call the regional office of the FBI."

And he'd been tempted to let it slide.

"How much was taken?"

"Ninety thousand, but only sixty was new money."

"Sixty? Looks like they split up the loot."

"The FBI will still be happy to hear from you."

A grinning Leo was standing before the desk when he hung up.

"Want to totter outside and see The Treasure of the Rondavoo Roadhouse, appearing now at your local sheriff's office?"

Ben rose painfully. "Next guy I hire better not have a goddamn sense of humor."

Curtis's Cadillac was backed up to the curb, a deputy named Ted standing alongside, his grin as wide as Leo's.

"Show him," said Leo. "Man, this calls for a trumpet fanfare."

Ted raised the trunk lid slowly and dramatically. The rug had been partially pulled back, exposing bills that matched the one in the wallet spread over the floor of the trunk between sheets of newspaper. Ben didn't have to count to know there were fifty-nine.

"No reason to suspect there was anything there," said Leo. "I can't even tell you what made me look."

"Never admit that, dummy.

You looked because you're smart and talented beyond belief. Anyway, congratulations. You've recovered what appears to be the loot from an armored car heist. Now lock the trunk, and you, Ted, sit on it until I tell you to get off or the FBI does, whichever occurs first. Since you did something to earn the big bucks I'm paying you, Leo, you can call the FBI. And don't disgrace me by acting like an excited rube cop. Act bored, as though we do this every day."

"Looks like Curtis—" Leo began as he followed him in.

"We don't know that. He might only be a messenger, trusted to sell the new money at a discount. My guess is he went to Freddie for a buyer, and no one would have known if he hadn't been hit on the head. Not our problem now. Belongs to the Feds."

Elizabeth—tall, thin, dyed blonde hair appearing to have been clipped with manicure scissors—who handled the phones during the day, waggled fingers terminating in two inch silver nails. "Lou Merlinsky on two."

He rolled his eyes. She could probably tear a deer carcass apart with her new fashion statement. "No change in Curtis," said Lou, "but his son seems very anxious about his father's car and personal pos-

sessions. I told him you had them and there was nothing to worry about. He said that since no change was expected in his father's condition for a few hours, he'd drive up with a friend and get them. That was an hour ago, so he should walk in at any time."

"I'll look forward to it."

Leo appeared in the doorway. "The Feds will be here as soon as they can arrange for a helicopter."

"Always go first class at taxpayers' expense," grunted Ben. "Don't ask why, but tell Ted to hide that Caddie behind Stan's service station and stay with it."

He shuffled after him and looked around. Amato was at his desk. Good. As soon as Leo returned, there would be three of them in the office. He glanced at the duty board. Two at the courthouse today, three out on the roads, Pickwell one of them. Pickwell's dream was to stop a rich and beautiful blonde breaking the speed limit in a convertible, who would instantly fall madly in love with him. If it happened in the movies, why not in real life? Half bald Pickwell never considered that he looked nothing like any male lead in any movie ever made.

"Elizabeth," he said, "tell Pickwell to put his daydream on hold and bring in Freddie."

Leo came back.

"Curtis's son and a friend are on their way to collect his personal effects," said Ben. "No matter what I tell them, back me up."

"What are you going to tell them?"

Ben tried to arch his back and suppressed a moan. "How the hell do I know?"

They walked in shortly thereafter: One wore the universal casual uniform: jeans, loosefitting black T-shirt—very loose, thought Ben—and sneakers, his hair tied back in a long brown ponytail. The shorter one—solid body; round, heavy face; styled wavy brown hair—was dressed like a tourist trying to impress the natives in a silk, short-sleeved, cream-colored shirt and creased slacks.

Leo led them to Ben's office, indicating the well-dressed one. "Larry Curtis. Here for his father's things." Hands at his sides, he surreptitiously lifted an index finger for Ben's benefit, pointing at Curtis's thin-soled shoes.

Curtis's handshake was firm. He indicated the man with him. "My buddy Julio."

"Sorry about your father," said Ben. "Those things don't happen too often around here."

"Should make it easier for you to find whoever did it."

"I expect so. How's he doing?"

"I'm a bit worried, even

though the doctor says he'll come around." Curtis looked worried, his eyes restless. "Like to get back as soon as possible, so if you'd let me have his things—"

"Of course." Ben unlocked the drawer and tossed the plastic bag and the wallet on the desk.

"You'll have to sign."

Leo frowned. Customary procedure demanded I.D. up to the wazoo before parting with a penny.

"I'll also need his car keys. Where's it parked?"

"We haven't recovered it yet."

"Recovered—?"

"We have bulletins out. Someone will spot it. Never carjack a distinctive vehicle."

"Carjack?"

"What did you think happened to your father?"

Curtis looked over his shoulder at Julio. "Mugging. I was told a mugging."

"Ah. Well, whoever told you had it wrong. The car was gone when we got there."

Leo caught up at last. "Of course we may not find it at all. It might have been taken to a chop shop. We know there's one operating in the county somewhere, but we haven't located it yet."

"Chop shop?"

"Well, that's the way it goes," said Ben heartily. "I have your phone number, so we'll be in

touch as soon as we know something." He pushed a slip across the desk. "If you'll sign—but you'll have to count the money first. Otherwise I can't release it." He smiled. "Can't have you coming back and saying we shortchanged you."

Curtis reluctantly opened the wallet and counted. The large bill was gone.

Ben didn't look at Leo.

Curtis counted again, spread the wallet as though looking for a secret compartment. "I don't understand. My father liked to carry a lot of cash. Are you sure this is all he had?"

"All we found," Ben assured him.

Curtis's lips thinned. He wrote down the total, signed, and slid the receipt to Ben.

Pickwell entered the outer office with Freddie; a big man, close to three hundred pounds of fat undulating on a six and a half foot frame, black hair parted in the center and pigtailed. Fat he might be, but with enough strength to put a man on the floor where he could stomp him, which was how he'd earned the name Freddie the Foot.

"That's the man who reported the carjacking," said Ben. "You can ask him what he saw, if you like."

Curtis crammed the wallet

and change in his pocket and snapped, "Maybe later."

"One thing more. Carjacking is a federal crime, so the Feds are on the way. I'm sure they'll want to talk to you. I suggest you wait."

"They can find me at the hospital."

"Oh, they're already there," lied Ben smoothly. "Probably talking to your father if he's come out of it."

Curtis and Julio looked at each other.

Curtis shrugged, and was suddenly holding a gun low, so that it couldn't be seen from outside the office.

Oh hell, thought Ben. Make all the plans in the world and you run into a man with no sense.

Leo's hands rose. "You going through three armed deputies?"

"Three armed deputies don't mean squat when you have hostages."

Curtis jerked his head. "Let's go, Julio. The fat guy lied to us. If we don't get it out of him now, we never will. Put your gun on him and take him to the car. I'll handle the chief rube."

One hand on Ben's collar, the other jamming the gun into his back, he lockstepped Ben into the outer office, Leo retreating before them.

Ben raised his hands as the deputies stared. "Just take it

easy." He glanced back over his shoulder. "I have a bad back. I've got to walk slow."

He winced as the gun poked hard right above his belt.

"You'll damned well walk as fast as I tell you."

Julio, dragging Freddie with him, was already out the door when the Morrissey brothers, who couldn't have helped but notice a strange man forcing Freddie along at gunpoint and decide such bizarre behavior was none of their business, came through to find Ben in the same predicament.

Now, that was too odd to ignore.

Kermie frowned. "The man's pointing a gun at Sheriff Ben. Ain't that illegal, George?"

"I think it is, Kerm. He's breakin' the law right here in the sheriff's own office."

Curtis waved the gun under their noses. "If you two apes don't get the hell out of my way, I'll shoot you both."

Only one word penetrated the perpetual murkiness in George's head. One big hand flashed up, immobilizing and crushing Curtis's fingers against the steel of the gun and bending the hand back. Bones cracked.

Curtis screamed.

So did Ben—louder, higher, and more chilling as Curtis's hand, enmeshed in his collar,

twisted his back cruelly and dropped him to the floor.

Leo and Pickwell dashed by to rescue Freddie.

Freddie needed no rescue at all. Julio's attention diverted by the dual screams, Freddie dropped him with one swing. Quivering like unconfined gelatin, The Foot was furiously stomping him while cursing and shrieking, "Teach you to pull a gun on me and call me a damned liar! The sheriff conned you, you brainless idiot!"*

Inside, George knelt solicitously beside Ben, who was contemplating suicide, wondering if he'd be confined to a wheelchair for the rest of his life, and dreading the young female doctor's baring his withered buttocks again.

"What's wrong, Sheriff Ben? You couldna got shot. That gun didn't go off."

Amato, cuffing a moaning Curtis to a chair, said, "He hurt his back."

"Maybe I can he'p," said George.

"DON'T . . . TOUCH . . . ME!"

"Only hurt for a second. Lift him on my back, Kermit."

Kermit lifted him as though he were a sack as Ben gritted through clenched teeth to Amato, "QUICK . . . SHOOT . . . THEM . . . BOTH!"

Kermit placed him back to back with George, who reached

back, locked arms through his, leaned forward to lift him, flexed his knees, and bounced him hard.

Gravity snapped Ben straight. Amazed to find himself upright, he gingerly moved one leg, then the other.

The pain was gone.

George grinned. "Daddy showed me. Said it been happening to people working in the fields far back as he could remember and they had to do for themselves. Weren't no hospital handy, were there? Just do'er, George, he said. If she don't work, then you boys will have to support your crippled old dad for the rest of his days. Always making jokes, Dad was. You want us to see this county attorney now, Sheriff Ben?"

Ben shuddered. Too much mental effort for George to even consider who would have to support the crippled old sheriff for the rest of his days if his homegrown therapy had failed.

"No. You two go home. I'll be out to see you."

The FBI came and went, taking with them Freddie the Foot, Curtis, Julio, the Cadillac, the wallet, and the bill Ben had replaced, and leaving the news that someone was entitled to a ten thousand dollar reward from the armored car company.

Leo said, "We scraped through that, didn't we?"

"My fault. Never thought he'd pull a gun in the sheriff's office. Sometimes I think we survive only because the crooks are dumber than we are."

"You knew he wasn't Curtis's son?"

"From the start. If I'd called the real one in Philadelphia, it would have taken him at least two hours to get to the medical center. But when Lou called, he was already there. Then Aaron tells me about the holdup and you find that money in the trunk. Very likely he was a partner posing as the son, but why? He could have walked into the hospital as a friend."

Leo thought. "We'd never turn the wallet and car over to a friend."

"You've got it. The FBI guys took the three of them apart like they had a key to their brains. Your cast of that Italian shoe helped, of course. Proved one of them was there. Freddie always insisted on dealing with one man. Curtis was nominated. He showed him the bill so he'd know they were serious, and told him he had fifty-nine more. The other two waited outside. An army could camp in that parking lot at night without being noticed. Freddie makes a few calls, tells Curtis the best offer is fifty cents on the dollar. Curtis goes out to tell the others, runs into the Morrisseys. George

decks him, and they walk away. The others see it and run to help, but they're too late. Couldn't use their guns in a situation like that, but Julio had picked up a rock. Curtis gets up. They argue over the deal. Walters sees them. All that money gone, plus Freddie's commission. Julio gets the bright idea to increase his share by bashing Curtis with the rock, making it a two-way split instead of three and letting the Morrisseys take the rap."

Leo frowned. "Sounds good so far, but why did they leave the money behind?" His face cleared. "They couldn't find the car keys because Curtis had buried them in that inside coat pocket where no one ever carries car keys—"

"You get an A. Time is running out. Walters has seen them, but they don't know that Rundayvoo patrons mind their own business. If he'd called us—"

"All they need is for a cop to find them standing over a body." Leo grinned. "Any kind of cop."

"They split. After all, the Cadie is going nowhere, and they're not dealing with a crack crime team. We have no reason to search it, and they can always get their hands on it later. But they'd overlooked that thousand dollar bill in Curtis's wallet and the questions it would raise. They call Freddie. He tells them the car is still there but Curtis is

at the medical center, not the morgue."

"At which point they must have been thinking so hard their brains were smoking," said Leo. "Curtis recovers, he's going to be mad enough to talk—"

"That wouldn't bother them if they could get their hands on the Caddie before his tubes come out. One of them remembers Curtis's son. We'll probably call him. Better if one passes himself off at the medical center as Larry Junior. He not only may get the chance to finish Curtis, but he takes away our reason to call the real one. Then he can come up here and claim the effects. If we don't cooperate, they take them anyway. Everything's fine until I tell them the car's been hijacked and there's no bill in the wallet. Who else but Freddie? Only he knew about the money. With the Feds on the way, it's then or never. Out come the guns."

"And in walk the Morrisseys."

"Shows you what can happen when you don't treat people with respect." Ben reached for the phone. "Now I call the real Curtis and give him the good news that his father will be fine and the bad news that he's under arrest for driving the getaway car in an armed robbery."

Lawrence T. Curtis, Jr., was pleased about the one piece of news, and stoical about the other.

"He's always been a crook, you know. I grew up with police chasing him through the house. I used to be ashamed until I realized that kids can't select their parents."

Ben hung up, thinking of the Morrisseys. Parents couldn't select their kids either, but the good ones did the best they could with what they had.

Emily was home, his back was only a touch tender, Freddie was gone, and the Rundayvoo was closed.

She agreed the Morrisseys had earned the reward, since they'd not only started it all but ended it in fine style.

"Really, though," she said, newfound awareness gleaming in her eyes, "I'm sure there's more here than meets the eye. Thousand dollar bills carry the portrait of Grover Cleveland. And their father was Grover Cleveland Morrissey." She looked at him triumphantly. "Don't you see?"

Push the buzzer, thought Ben. That's one question he wasn't even going to try to answer.

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FICTION

DAD AND BONNIE AND CLYDE

Teddy Keller



Illustration by Hank Blaustein

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 1/97

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Mom remembered because it was the first time she'd used adhesive tape to cover the cracks around window frames and doors. I remembered because we got out of school early. And Dad remembered because he received a telegram from the Federal Bureau of Investigation. After that, the three of us all remembered the day for the same bunch of reasons.

It was about eleven in the morning, and we had just got to the arithmetic part of the day. Rosemary was principal's office monitor that week. She brought a note to our room, and she was hardly out the door before Miss Sinclair told us to pick up our things.

"It's another dust storm," she said, "and I want you all to get home as quickly as you can." She got real serious. "Now don't run or you'll breathe in more dust. But go straight home and close the doors. We'll all come back tomorrow morning when the sky is clear."

Well, I liked to get out of school as much as the next kid, but I kinda hated leaving Miss Sinclair early. She was gobs older than me, of course. She was also pretty, and if she could teach me the multiplication tables, she could also inspire my fantasies. I was the brave knight, fighting the evil king,

and she was the princess in the prison tower. I was the cowboy who . . .

"Hurry, Edward," she said. "Your mother will be worried."

I wanted to stall until I got up the nerve to say that I'd worry about Miss Sinclair, but everybody else was already gone. I did give her an extra smile before I grabbed my arithmetic and geography books and hustled on my way.

There wasn't much wind. Not yet. But the whole southern sky was the color of dry Kansas dirt, a great brown dome that was moving northward even as I watched. I really wasn't scared because I'd seen the dust before. But I wished I'd told Miss Sinclair that I'd protect her from dust or anything.

That's when I tripped over a crack in the sidewalk. A big tree grew beside the curb, and a root had pushed up one slab. I'd been looking at the sky. Now, all of a sudden, I was belly-down on the sidewalk in the thick of the grit.

The sidewalk was gritty. My shoes were gritty. My pants and shirt were gritty. My teeth were gritty. And my elbows felt like I'd left some skin in that grit.

"Hey, kid," a woman called. "You okay?"

I was glad it wasn't Miss Sinclair because I felt pretty dopey right then. I was just passing the Standard station, on the cor-

ner where U.S. Highway 81 came through town, and there was a Studebaker at the gas pumps and this woman was standing with one foot on the running board.

She wasn't quite as old as Miss Sinclair, which somebody had said was twenty-five. She was slender and she wore a black dress, and I thought I saw smoke coming out of her mouth. Then I saw the man on the other side of the car—he had a stubby cigar in his fist. And there was a younger-looking guy in the back seat.

"Better watch your step, Ed. You might break the sidewalk." Murray, the station owner, was a great kidder. His coveralls looked like he'd already done a day's work, and he had just pumped about nine gallons of regular. That meant the slender woman and the man with the cigar would spend a whole dollar on gasoline.

"Same to you, Murray," I said, which wasn't a nifty thing to say but it was all I could think of. I noticed that the big door of his grease pit was open, but there was no car inside.

"Hey, Ed," Murray yelled after me. "Tell your dad, over the ocean, over the sea."

I half turned, ready to holler at him, and saw the slender woman shrug and look at the man with the cigar and the guy

in the back seat. She walked toward the office. Murray was laughing at his own joke, which was the only way anybody was going to laugh because I sure didn't get it.

One thing I could do was whistle loud, so I started whistling "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" I hoped Murray felt like two cents. But before I got halfway down the block I had grit in my whistler, so I shut up and hurried the rest of the way home.

"Come on in and close the door," Mom said. Her smile wasn't as wide as usual, and her usual cheery nature was a little strained. Her print dress was wrinkled.

I'd hardly gotten inside before she put a wet towel all rolled up in a long cylinder across the bottom of the door. Then she started pulling shades in the living room, which she always did when the dust blew, and the house was dark inside.

I didn't even see Dad until he turned on the lamp beside the davenport. He wore his summer uniform of tan pants and shirt, and there was a band of sweat around his middle where he usually wore his gunbelt. He was holding a yellow paper; I knew a telegram when I saw one.

"You want to see what just

came from the G-men?" he asked.

"Who to?" I said. I put my schoolbooks down.

"To whom." Mom had to correct me now and then.

"To me," Dad said, and I could tell this was a big deal for him.

I went over and sat beside him, and he handed me the telegram, which was addressed to Chief Wesley Bowman.

"CLYDE BARROW AND BONNIE PARKER ROBBED BANKS IN OKLAHOMA STOP MAY BE HEADED YOUR WAY STOP BE ON LOOKOUT AND USE ALL CAUTION STOP NOTIFY THIS OFFICE OF ANY DEVELOPMENT." The name at the bottom wasn't familiar, but it said "DEPUTY DIRECTOR."

"Holy cow!" I said. It was the first telegram I'd ever seen that went over ten words. I couldn't even imagine how much it cost. And that meant it was important.

Dad said, "My big chance to nab somebody on the Public Enemy list, and here comes Texas."

"You just let Texas blow on through," Mom said. "Nebraska will blow back about next Tuesday."

"I should be out looking," Dad said.

"For what?" Mom asked.

"The description I had before," Dad said, "is that Clyde's not very tall and Bonnie is a little bit shorter. He's stocky; she's

skinny. He's not very goodlooking, but she's not half bad."

Mom said, "That sounds like half the people in Kansas."

Even with the lamp on, the room had got darker. I went over and peeked around the window shade. That's when I saw the adhesive tape that sealed out some of the dust. Outdoors was dark brown now, and the wind was whipping trees in the front yard.

"I just saw a stocky man and a skinny woman up at the Standard station," I said. "Murray was pumping 'em a tankful."

"You always notice license tags," Dad said. "Where were they from?"

"Oklahoma," I said. "Studebaker sedan with—"

Dad was already on his way to the phone. He grabbed it by the throat and flipped it so that the receiver leaped up and he caught it with his left hand. He told the operator, "Three-one-six," and he fidgeted for long seconds. Then he said, "Jack, you get in touch with the three banks and tell them to lock up right now. Clyde Barrow and Bonnie Parker may be in town. . . . That's right. . . . And you guys keep your eyes peeled for a Studebaker with Oklahoma plates, probably stolen. . . . Jack, get the banks closed and don't waste time asking questions. Get going."

That's when I got going. Dad was buckling on his gunbelt, and Mom was trying not to fuss. She had learned long ago about being a cop's wife, but she hadn't really got used to it. We weren't that far from Wichita, and the city crime sometimes spilled over on us. Even in a small town people did bad things now and then.

I knew she'd touch him on the arm and say, "Now, you be careful, Wesley." He'd give her that big grin and kiss her on the cheek and pat her on the backside, and she'd scold him, and they'd both forget about me.

Dust had already blown through the screen and drifted on the back porch, but I forgot to hold my breath when I went down the back steps. The official police car, the new Ford V-8, was in the driveway. I got myself curled up on the floor of the back seat just as the screen door slammed and Dad rushed to the car.

The Ford lurched back and then barreled up the street. My problem was that I'd inhaled a snootful of dust and I had a tickle about to explode. I rubbed my nose and held my breath and grabbed my nose and wiggled it. We hadn't gone two blocks before I sneezed a sneeze to rattle the windows.

The car slowed, and I knew Dad was thinking of turning

back. "I ought to boot you out," he said.

"Aw, Dad," I said.

"Your mother . . ." He knew I knew, so he didn't need to say it. "Well, at least get up here and help me look for that Studebaker."

I climbed over the seat back and sat up front. Dad had his headlights on, but I couldn't see a block up Main Street. Already my nose tickled again, and my throat was scratchy and my teeth felt like sandpaper. In the lights of other cars I could see the dust swirling and blowing in waves.

"There's the Studey," I said, pointing.

A few other cars were in diagonal spaces, but the Studebaker was parked parallel to the curb smack in front of First National. It looked empty, but Dad pulled in behind it. "Oops," I said, squinting through the dust. "Texas plates. Wrong car."

"You just saved me a false arrest."

I could feel my face burning. "Well, golly, it sure looked like the same car."

"I ought to give somebody a ticket for parking like that," Dad said, "but we've got other fish to fry."

We passed Prairie State Bank; there were people standing at the door looking out.

Same thing at Farmers and Ranchers Bank.

The dust was thicker now. It wasn't like fog, where you can see the glow of lights. Oncoming cars just suddenly bore through the brown curtain and there they were, not fifty feet away.

Dad drove up Main Street and turned right on Central. We were headed west, and the dust was thicker and it had a drier taste to it. He made another right on Maple. We were half-way down the block when some bank's burglar alarm cut loose.

"What the hell?" Dad growled, and it was the first time I'd ever heard him cuss.

He stomped the foot-feed. The Ford gulped dust, then sputtered and coughed before it lurched into motion. We took the corner on two wheels and roared toward Main Street. Dad slowed for that turn to make sure there weren't other cars he couldn't see for the dust. Then he gunned it to First National.

The Studebaker was gone. On the sidewalk a man jumped around and waved his arms. I rolled down the window as Dad pulled in to the curb.

"They got a whole bagful of money," the man yelled. It was Mr. Marston, a bank bigshot. "He came in right before your officer called, chief. It was Clyde Barrow."

"How do you know?" Dad shouted.

"He told us," Mr. Marston hollered back. "And he said Miss Bonnie Parker thanked us, too."

"Did you see which way they headed?"

Mr. Marston pointed. "Toward Wichita."

"Call my office," Dad shouted. "Tell them what happened and that I'm in pursuit."

To me he said, "You can roll up that window and keep the dust out." He steered the Ford into the street. "Can you imagine a bank robber bragging like that? 'Miss Bonnie Parker thanks you.' Boy, that gets my dander up."

"They had Texas license tags," I said.

"Yeah. I've heard of people switching plates. Of course it's against the law." Then he laughed. "But so's robbing banks." He got serious again. "They can't have more'n a couple of minutes' head start."

Dad barreled the Ford down Main Street in the direction of Wichita. He was up to thirty miles per hour, and it was like driving into a brown wall. We swerved to miss a car going the other way; that guy honked his horn, and the sound faded into the blowing dust.

"Chasing 'em's no good," Dad said, and the Ford slowed to a crawl. "They could be ten feet

away, and I'd never know it. Besides, we might hit somebody."

"You could turn on the siren," I said, picturing myself in a police car in hot pursuit of dangerous criminals.

"Who'd pay any attention?" Dad shifted down to low gear and made a U turn. "About all I can do is go to the office and call Wichita. Maybe the dust's not so thick there, and they can set up a roadblock."

"Good idea," I said.

There were hardly any other cars moving along the street, and Dad drummed his fingers on the steering wheel as he drove slowly up Main. I knew he'd rather be roaring down the highway and shooting at the bank robbers, and that'd give me a swell story to tell in school tomorrow. But he turned on Second, drove the two blocks, and parked in front of the police station.

"You might stay here and be my lookout," he said. "Just in case."

"Yes, sir, marshal," I snapped.

He laughed and punched me lightly on the shoulder. Then he hurried into the dust. I could barely see him go through the front door.

I scrooched around until I could look out both sides and the back. Any direction was the same. Maybe half a block and everything turned brown. The

delivery truck from Becker's Grocery chugged past. Pretty soon an ice truck poked along the street; if he'd been going any slower, the ice would have melted before he got where he was going. On the other hand, if he stopped close by, I'd go swipe me a sliver of ice to suck on and soothe my gritty mouth and throat.

The ice truck stopped at the corner, and I had my door half open when Dad came running out of the police station. He jumped behind the wheel and kicked the starter. The Ford fired right up this time.

"They just robbed Prairie State," Dad said. He backed and shifted, and this time he turned on the siren. "They fooled us," he said. His voice sounded mean and mad. "They doubled back, but we couldn't see 'em for the dust."

The tires screeched when Dad turned onto Main and the siren wailed, and man, did people look. He gunned it past First National, and he looked hard when we passed Farmers and Ranchers Bank.

There was already a bunch of people in front of Prairie State. Dad pulled in close and got out, and I cranked down my window.

I recognized Mr. Schroeder because he sang in the choir at church and I knew he was a

banker. There were other men standing close by; they all talked fast and pointed in the direction of Wichita.

I could hear a little. Somebody said, "Clyde Barrow," and somebody else said, "Bonnie and Clyde." There were other bits and pieces. "Headed for Wichita." "Where was our police force?" "They just robbed First National." "Two banks? Like Coffeyville?"

Well, it was almost like Coffeyville. That was back in the nineties, when the Dalton Gang robbed two banks at the same time. Boy, that was some shootout. Killed four members of the gang and the same number of townspeople. I was glad Dad wasn't getting shot at.

By that time the other police car had arrived, and two of Dad's officers got out. They went into the bank with a bunch of the people who'd been standing around. Dad came back to the car. He looked ready to dent somebody's head.

He was kinda mumbling to himself as he started the Ford again. This time he turned on lights and siren and everything, and we took off toward Wichita. I think he'd forgotten I was there because he drove like Barney Oldfield. The way he plowed into that brown wall scared even me. We were going almost fifty.

We got through town real

quick, but out on the highway the dust seemed thicker than ever. I had glimpses of landmarks as we hurtled along. When we roared past the Kessler farm, I knew we were five miles out of town.

So did Dad. He slowed the Ford then and growled, "We've lost 'em. They could be anywhere."

"Yeah," I said. "They coulda gone around the block and headed toward Denver or Kansas City."

Dad got the car turned around. He wasn't in that big a hurry to get back to town. I figured it was because he hadn't prevented the robberies and he hadn't caught the bank robbers. Some of those people on Main Street would be yelling bloody murder.

I got to thinking about the stories I could tell in school tomorrow, and I said, "Boy oh boy, Bonnie and Clyde right in town."

"Yeah," Dad said. "Bonnie and Clyde may cost me my job. Bonnie and Clyde were . . ." And he was thinking and staring at the dust and the road. "It was Clyde all alone inside both the banks. And that kid driving the car."

"Must've been," I said.

"Nobody ever said anything about seeing Bonnie."

I thought about that. "I saw her at the filling station."

"But where was she later? From all I've heard about those two, they pull their jobs together. They go in side by side, and they shoot people."

"Nobody here got shot," I said.

"Bonnie and Clyde are killers," Dad said. "Nobody even fired a shot."

"She didn't look like a killer." Which was a dumb thing to say because most killers don't look like killers.

Dad speeded up the car a little. "Maybe they're a fake Bonnie and Clyde."

"You mean . . ." I wasn't sure I followed his thought. "Do you mean they played like they were Bonnie and Clyde 'cause that'd scare people?"

"My guess is that they played. Let's Pretend so the bank robbery would be blamed on Bonnie and Clyde and nobody'd come looking for these other people."

"But . . ." Something didn't add up. "When I went past the filling station, Murray said to tell you . . ."

"Tell me what?"

It took me a second or two to get the song going through my head. Then I kinda whisper-sang, "My Bonnie lies over the ocean, my Bonnie lies over the sea . . ."

"Murray sang to you?"

"Huh-uh. He said, 'Tell your dad, over the ocean, over the

sea.' I thought he was just kidding around."

Dad speeded up a little more. "Maybe he meant that he recognized Bonnie and Clyde. And they were right there. And maybe they had a gun on him."

"Maybe so," I said. "Did you ever see Murray put gas in a car when the driver had a cigar going?"

"Oh, Murray'd never do that."

"Well, he sure did. With that Studebaker."

"Something was sure out of whack."

We were getting closer to town, and Dad slowed down again, maybe to not run over anybody, maybe to get his plans in order.

He said, "So, Murray thought he recognized Bonnie and Clyde, like they wanted him to. But if they drove away and left him, he'd call the police first thing. So she stayed at the station with a gun on Murray, and Clyde and the young guy drove downtown to rob First National."

"And the dust was so thick," I said, "and they got away so easy, they went back and robbed Prairie State."

"While we were chasing our tails in the dust storm."

"Only it wasn't the real Bonnie and Clyde."

Dad laughed. "Those poor saps. Of all the days they could

pick to try to cash in on a couple of killers and just disappear in the dust. But then they had to hold up a second bank when they might've gotten away after the first."

I laughed some, too, even if I didn't understand the irony of it until later. "They still could."

"Clyde, or whatever his name is, isn't going to head out of town until he picks up Bonnie, or whatever her name is. And they've still got to decide what to do with Murray."

"Do you think they'll shoot him?"

"They'll sure try to make him think they will."

"Which means," I said, "we've got a real problem."

Dad was emphatic. "I've got a problem. You're going home."

Dad slowed down in front of Prairie State Bank. He beeped his horn and got Jack and the other officer to look our way. Then he waved for them to follow us. They headed for their car as if they were real glad to get away from that bunch of people.

"Now," Dad said, "we'll drive past Murray's station. I won't look, so they won't get suspicious. But you take a good look and tell me what you see."

Which is what we did. But what with the dust and the wind and the distance, I couldn't see much.

"It just looks dark inside," I said. "Nobody's moving around."

"Oh boy." Dad was wrestling with the possibilities. "We don't dare go storming in there with guns blazing. You go shooting around a filling station and you can start a bad fire."

"Can you just wait till they come out?"

"That might take forever. And if they know we're waiting, they could use Murray as a shield."

"But so far they don't know you're waiting."

"I don't think they know we've got them figured out." Dad turned a corner and looked back to see the other police car. "We've got to get inside that station."

"You'll think of something," I said.

He zipped around the block and stopped in front of our house. "You stay put, and don't say anything to your mother or she'll have a conniption."

I got out and he drove off, and then Jack and the other officer went past. They were so intent on following Dad they didn't even wave at me. I ran for the garage. I didn't know exactly what I was going to do, but I had the beginnings of an idea.

Everything in the garage was dusty, but my new bike had just a thin layer. That'd blow off if I rode fast. Which was what I did. When I got close to Murray's

Standard station, I got off and let some air out of the front tire. And then I walked my bike to the gas pump island where the air and water hoses were.

I could feel people inside the station watching me and probably cussing me out for getting in the middle of their getaway. But nothing could be more innocent, even in a dust storm, than a kid with a flat tire.

I got real busy with the bike and the air hose, and I pretended to ignore the station office. I still couldn't see anything inside. So I put air in the tire and squeezed it and bounced the front end. Finally I shook my head and leaned the bike against the gas pump and barged right into the office.

"Hey, Murray," I said. "Can I borrow your tire gauge?"

Then I rubbed my eyes and said, "Man, that dust."

Between rubs I saw through to the back where the Studebaker was parked over the grease pit with the big door closed. Murray sat on a metal chair by the cash register, and Bonnie and Clyde stood right beside him. My heart pounded like I had just run ten miles.

"Oh, hi," I said. "How're you folks?" And I kept going and I said, "You always leave that tire gauge out by the compressor."

And Bonnie kinda mumbled and Clyde said, "That damn

kid," and Murray said, "You gotta let him get the gauge."

Then I was in the back and I hollered, "Boy, it sure is dark back here."

Before Murray could say anything about a light switch, I heaved up the big door. Dad's police car was down at the end of the block. I grabbed the gauge off the compressor and turned around and saw the door to the restroom. That's when I remembered the young guy who'd driven the Studebaker. I went past the restroom and twisted the key in the lock. Then I hustled on through the office and out the front door.

I hunkered down with the bike and air hose again, and I got the hose to hissing like a giant snake. That's when the big air compressor kicked in and made enough noise to drown out the high school band. While the people inside were watching me out front, Dad and Jack walked in through the back and arrested Bonnie, or whatever her name was, and Clyde, or whatever his name was. I had to show them where I'd locked the other guy in the restroom.

Turned out that the real Bonnie and Clyde never got closer than Oklahoma. Our robbers were from Hickoryville, and they had read enough about the real ones to get some pretty

neat ideas. The fake Clyde just barely got to First National in time, and, when that alarm went off, the other banks unlocked their front doors and he walked right in at Prairie State.

But the robbers only had two guns between them, and just one of them worked and they didn't have any ammunition for it. So, since nobody got hurt and the desperadoes didn't even get out of town with their loot, the judge wasn't too tough on them.

The chief was tough on me, though. Oh, he was all riled up.

"If your mother ever finds out what you did," he said, "she'll skin me alive."

"It wasn't your fault."

"I should've locked you up in jail."

"Those people didn't hurt anybody. You said so yourself."

But that's not the way the story went around town. The way the story went was that these three dangerous criminals had been captured in our town, and nobody knew how exactly, but I had helped. Dad was written up in the paper and I was the only one who knew he didn't dare explain too much or Mom would've bitten his head off.

Miss Sinclair got just enough of the story that she gave me that worried-proud smile next day. She touched my shoulder and she smiled wider and she said, "Oh, Edward." And then she bent over and kissed me on the forehead.

It was the only time I was ever kissed by a teacher, especially one who could've been a fairy princess. My feet didn't touch the ground for two days.

FICTION

PACKAGE DEAL

James A.
Noble

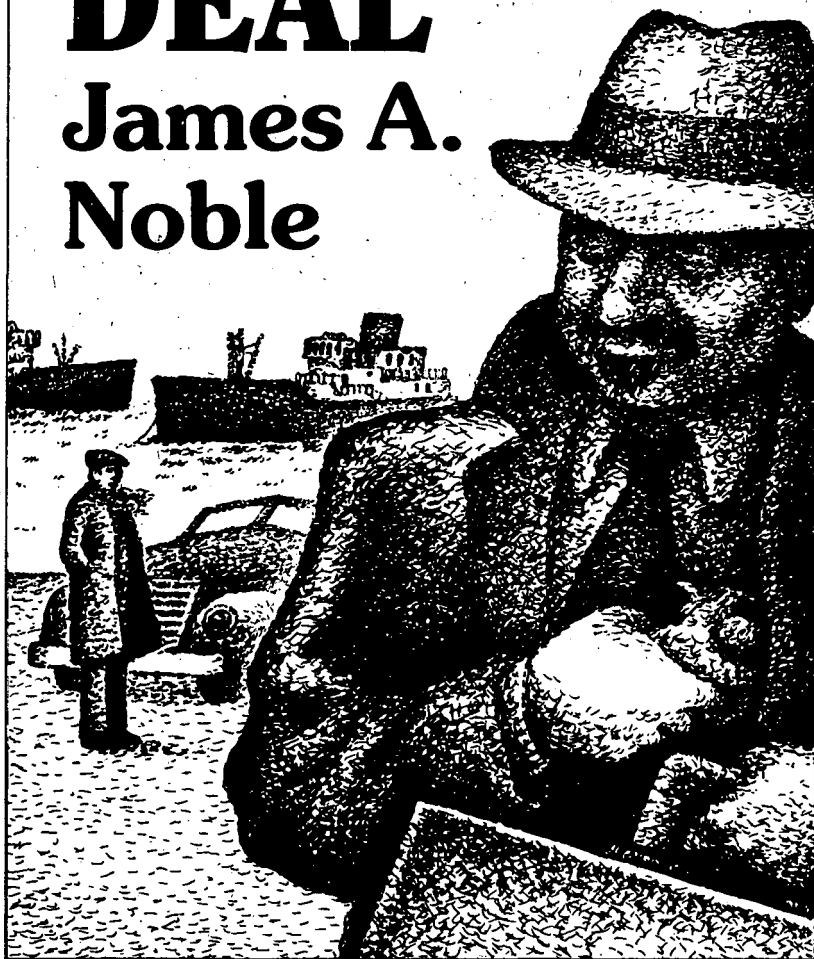


Illustration by Kevin Kreneck

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“G”ot a job for you,” said Bernie, sitting down on the end of the bench next to Caesar.

Caesar scanned the park and then said, “Who’s the hit?”

“Fellow named Raymond Bett.”

“Never heard of him. Who’s the client?”

“Stubby Packard.”

Caesar snorted. “The cheap hood who runs the bookie joints on the South Side. Cheez.”

“The same,” responded Bernie.

“I ain’t doing a nobody for a lightweight. Forget it.”

“He’s paying a hundred.”

Caesar’s eyebrows rose. He turned on the bench. “A hundred grand?”

Bernie nodded.

“Wow, I’d even do you for that kind of money.”

Bernie glared at Caesar.

“Hey, come on,” said Caesar, trying look apologetic. “I’m joking. You’re my friend, my front man . . . the only reason I’m making any money.”

Bernie relaxed a bit.

Caesar looked away. “Why?”

“Why?”

“Yeah, why?” repeated Caesar. “Why would a second-rate mobster paying that kind of money want to snuff a nobody?”

Bernie shrugged. “The only thing Stubby told me was it involved some gambling debts.”

“Those must be *some* debts,” noted Caesar. “Stubby wants a collector, not me. He can’t get his money from a dead man.” He squinted up at the sunny sky.

“I don’t like it,” he said finally. “That’s too much money just to hit a peasant. Smells bad.”

“Then sniff this,” said Bernie, dropping a fat brown envelope on Caesar’s lap after looking around.

“My cut?”

“Eighty grand, up front.”

Caesar hefted the envelope before slipping it into his inside coat pocket.

“You can tell Stubby he’s got a contract,” said Caesar after a moment, “as soon as I check out this Raymond Bett myself. Do me a favor, will you, Bernie?”



"What's that?"

"Tell Stubby if this deal isn't on the up and up I'm coming over to his joint and do one for nothing. Just say it's my package deal. Buy one, get one free."

Bernie got up. "I'll tell him."

Caesar spent a couple of weeks tailing Raymond Bett and gathering information. The most extraordinary thing about Bett was that he appeared to be ordinary . . . an ordinary bum, that is. He was unemployed and virtually friendless. He drank heavily and occasionally passed out in dark, secluded alleys while staggering home from the many bars he regularly frequented. When he wasn't in a bar, he was in one of Stubby's joints, making big bets on sporting events and numbers.

Bett was a man with dangerous habits living in a dangerous neighborhood and keeping a relatively routine schedule. He was a victim waiting to happen. The only thing keeping Caesar from taking care of business immediately was the question of where the man was getting his money.

Caesar realized that people with money *usually* have some importance. He didn't want to find out too late that he had rubbed out some rich dude's eccentric son or a member of the Witness Protection Program. That kind of hit could bring a man in his profession some real heat.

He was still going about the business of learning as much as possible when he discovered the source of Bett's money and the *real* reason for Stubby's big contract.

Caesar had put on one of his many disguises—mustache, sideburns, and glasses—and had gone to the Cellar Dweller, one of Bett's hangouts. He made certain the crowd was light and Bett was elsewhere before entering the bar.

The bartender seemed to be in a perpetual state of stroking his chin with his left hand. He was also a nonstop talker. A couple of beers and Caesar soon had the man's rapt attention. According to the chin-stroker, when Bett came in on Fridays, the entire neighborhood showed up. Bett would buy rounds for the entire bar as often as three or four times a night. Every freeloader in town was certain to be there. When Caesar asked where Bett got the money to be so generous, Chin-stroker looked around for other ears before leaning across the bar and whispering in a low voice:

"The guy gambles. He *never* loses. His nickname is Mr. Lucky."



That got Caesar's attention. "No kidding?"

"Yeah! One Friday he came in here and got a little blitzed, you know? He told me some bookie owes him three or four hundred thousand bucks for about two dozen big wins."

"The bookie owes *him* money?"

The chin-stroker snickered. "Ain't that a kick. Apparently this Bett is running low on cash and is talking about squealing to the cops about some of the bookie's fronts if he doesn't get his due."

Caesar tried to look surprised. "Cheeky of the guy."

Chin-stroker looked around again. "Yeah. I tell you, if he don't watch his mouth, the mob's liable to send somebody around to do something about it. You know what I mean?"

"You really think so?"

Chin-stroker stood upright, winked, and nodded his head in the affirmative before moving on to another customer at the other end of the bar.

Caesar sat at the bar a few minutes trying to figure an angle on this new revelation. Stubby was a fairly insignificant mob man, but important enough not to threaten for the money. Besides, he could represent a meal ticket on a regular basis. Bett, on the other hand, was obviously tapped out. Going ahead with the hit still seemed to be his best choice. He left a mediocre tip and slipped quietly out of the bar. Extraordinary tips or behavior attracted attention. Bad for business.

The hit was more difficult than Caesar had expected it to be. In four carefully orchestrated attempts, something always went wrong. Bett unexpectedly changed his routine twice. Then there was the drunk who knocked over the poisoned drink intended for him. A bunch of kids suddenly appeared in the deserted alley where his victim was staggering home. Each time Caesar had to abort the hit and scramble to get away without being spotted. Somehow Bett never realized he was a marked man.

Caesar became mildly disturbed by the thought that Bett's luck seemed to extend well beyond winning bets on numbers and sporting events. The man deserved the name Mr. Lucky. He decided to increase the odds significantly in his own favor and reached for his phone book.

The caller easily convinced Bett to go to a small deserted shipyard where he would receive the money that Stubby owed him. Caesar

could sense the anticipation in Bett's voice throughout the call. When Caesar hung up, he smiled at the phone.

"You might be the luckiest man on earth," he mused, "but you certainly ain't the smartest."

Bett was right on time. He practically ran up to the disguised Caesar.

"Stubby send you?" he asked.

Caesar handed him the briefcase he was holding. "Here's your money . . . Mr. Lucky."

Bett grinned and took the briefcase. He carried it over to the back of his car and set it on the trunk to open it. Caesar took several steps back. When Bett undid the snaps and opened the briefcase, the bomb failed to detonate.

"What the heck is this?" asked Bett, staring at the switches, wires, and sticks of dynamite in the briefcase. He looked up in time to see the business end of Caesar's revolver pointed at him. The weapon clicked harmlessly.

"Damn!" cursed Caesar, pulling the trigger again and again. "What's it take to kill you, you lucky . . ."

The gun suddenly roared in his hand. Bett whirled and fell across the briefcase on the trunk of the car. The resulting explosion was horrendous. Caesar dropped to the ground and covered his head as fragments flew around him.

When the blast had subsided, Caesar slowly got to his feet and staggered over to the demolished car. What remained of Bett was lying close by.

" . . . stiff," he finished.

He checked the body for anything that might give the cops clues or incriminate Stubby. He found a couple of betting slips and gambling receipts that he stuffed into his own coat pocket. He turned to leave and had walked only a few steps when he spotted it lying on the ground. He looked around to be certain no one was watching before he grabbed it and ran.

Four days later Caesar was arrested for the murder of one Raymond Bett. He was imprisoned at the county jail and held without bail. A few days after his trial began, Bernie came to visit him at the jail.

"Looks bad, Caesar," said Bernie through the screen separating them in the visitors' area.



"No kidding. Where'd you boys find that lawyer of mine? That guy's so certain we're going to lose, he's become despondent. I have to spend half my time in court trying to cheer *him* up."

"He's the best there is, Caesar."

"And where'd did those three witnesses come from?"

"Five witnesses saw you kill Bett," corrected Bernie in a whisper. "There's still two more to take the stand. They *all* saw you from one of those deserted buildings in the shipyard."

Caesar shook his head. "I don't buy it. I was wearing a pretty good disguise."

"These guys picked out your picture with and without the hair-pieces. Not only that, all of them saw you throw the gun into the harbor from the seawall. They know the exact spot. The cops have divers looking for it now. Please tell me that you didn't toss the gun in the water from the seawall, will you?"

Caesar nodded before he hung his head.

"Oh man. They're going to find it, buddy," warned Bernie. "Ballistics will match it with the slugs taken from the body."

"Any good news?"

Bernie took a deep breath. "I'm afraid not. Before you snuffed Bett, he must've blabbed all over town about Stubby owing him big money. I just found out that the cops have picked Stubby up and are grilling him as we speak."

"You know that little pipsqueak better than me, Caesar. He won't take a fall for nobody. He'll crack sooner than later. You and me will both burn for this one."

Caesar dropped his head onto the table.

"We're in bad need of a miracle, my friend. Got any?" asked Bernie after a few moments of silence.

"I want you to smuggle something into this jail for me. Can you do it?" said Caesar, sitting upright again.

"Like what? You know, a Sherman tank or a bazooka is a bit difficult . . ."

"A package, just a small metal box," replied Caesar. "A little bigger than an ordinary cigar box."

"No problem," said Bernie.

"Under no circumstances is the package to be opened," Caesar warned him. "It's been carefully wrapped and sealed. I'll know immediately if anyone has tampered with it."

"Whatever you say," said Bernie. "No one will attempt to open it. You have my word. Where is it?"



"Under my house, next to a loose grate in the foundation wall in the rear."

"I'll get it tonight. When will you need it?"

"As soon as possible. My trial resumes Monday, you know."

Bernie nodded. "I'll try. You're not going to tell me what's in it, are you?"

"Sure I will, my friend. A miracle."

The trial resumed on Monday, before the box arrived. The prosecutor opened with the two remaining witnesses who had seen the murder from the building in the shipyard. They both testified to seeing a man shoot Raymond Bett and then blow him to pieces with a bomb. When each witness was asked to identify the killer, he pointed to Caesar sitting behind the defense table.

The prosecutor then began to paint a picture of a hit man hired by gangsters to silence Bett, who was about to blow the whistle on the mob. He actually made the bum sound like some sort of crime-fighting hero. Caesar had an irresistible desire to ask his attorney for an airsickness bag.

To prove his point, the prosecutor called as his witness one Gilbert Stanwick. To Caesar's horror, Gilbert turned out to be the chin-stroker, the bartender from the Cellar Dweller.

As Gilbert began testifying about what Bett had said at the bar, Caesar dropped his head, slid down in his chair, and began searching for a crack to hide in. Gilbert, in the meantime, glanced at him more and more frequently. Caesar realized that the only thing standing between himself and the gas chamber was the quality of the disguise he'd worn that night at the Cellar Dweller. When he dared to peek up, he could see the bartender thoughtfully rubbing that chin of his, obviously on the verge of recognition. The threat continued until Gilbert finished his testimony.

At precisely three P.M., as Gilbert left the stand and started toward him, peering at him intently, the judge smacked the gavel on the block and adjourned the court until eight the following morning. At that moment Gilbert stopped, let out a deep sigh, and shook his head as if convinced that he had never seen Caesar before. He turned and walked away. Caesar was so visibly relieved his attorney had to ask him why he was sobbing.

The guards had just returned Caesar to his solitary cell when a cook at the jail came by pushing a cart full of food.

"I think you should try one of our box lunches today," she said.



"This just arrived a short time ago." From under the cart she pulled the small sealed box Caesar had been waiting for.

"Bon appétit," said the cook and ambled away, pushing the cart.

Caesar stared at the box for the rest of the day. After lights-out, he meticulously peeled back the seals and multiple wrappings and opened it. Gently, carefully, he removed its contents.

On Tuesday the trial took a startling turn. The five previous witnesses came forth as a group and admitted they all had been drinking heavily together at the building beside the shipyard on the night of the murder. Four of them had passed out. Only one man had observed the murder. That man showed the others which mug shot to pick from the albums when the police mistakenly left them alone at the station house for a brief period. Even so, that single witness swore up and down that Caesar was the man he saw that night. According to the one witness, the fact that he was probably drunk and that he was nearsighted and had lost his glasses earlier was no excuse for letting any murderer get away. The prosecutor began staring at the ceiling as if waiting for extraterrestrial help.

Acquittal was assured when the elated defense attorney asked about the gun the police had found in the harbor. Grudgingly the prosecutor admitted that ballistics could not get a match on the slugs found in the body with bullets test-fired from the recovered gun. When Caesar spotted the gun on the evidence table, he understood why.

Within hours the prosecutor admitted openly that his case had fallen apart and that the authorities had little evidence on which to hold Caesar, let alone convict him. The judge declared a mistrial, and Caesar was freed.

As he left the jail after retrieving his possessions, he was surprised to see Bernie waiting for him outside. He was standing by the door of a limousine.

"You been holding out on me, Bernie?"

"It's Stubby's. He loaned it to me so I could come and pick you up."

Caesar looked up and down the car.

"The cops couldn't break him, Caesar. I never thought *he'd* be a standup guy. He's on our side. Surprising, huh?"

Caesar grinned and patted the metal box under his right arm. "Not really. I knew he'd hold."

The two climbed into the back and instructed the chauffeur to



take them to a local nightspot. Bernie pushed a button to raise the glass barrier between the driver and themselves.

"Who bribed the witnesses?" asked Bernie.

"Nobody," answered Caesar. "What happened really happened."

"Amazing. How about that gun they found? How do you explain that?"

"I can think of only one possible answer," replied Caesar. "Some time before I did Bett, someone must have thrown a revolver similar to mine in the harbor. The police found *that* gun instead of mine. Mine must still be in the water."

Bernie shook his head. "Give me a break, will you? You know the odds of something like that happening?"

Caesar shrugged. "Ten thousand to one against?"

"More than that, you can bet," said Bernie. "You must be the luckiest guy on earth."

"Of that you can be assured," replied Caesar, setting the metal box down on the seat and opening it. He reached inside.

Wide-eyed, a startled Bernie jumped back across the seat into the far corner of the limo. He threw a protective arm up in front of his face. "Good heavens, man. What is that?"

Caesar smiled. "Why, it's my Ray Bett's foot."

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THE MYSTERIOUS PHOTOGRAPH



Henri Silberman, N.Y.C.

The choir invisible. We will give a prize of \$25 to the person who invents the best mystery story (in 250 words or less, and be sure to include a crime), based on the above photograph. The story will be printed in a future issue. Reply to Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, New York 10020. Please label your entry "January Contest," and be sure your name and address are written on the story you submit. If possible, please also include your Social Security number.

The winning entry for the August Mysterious Photograph contest will be found on page 157.

FICTION

The House on the Edge

D. A. McGuire

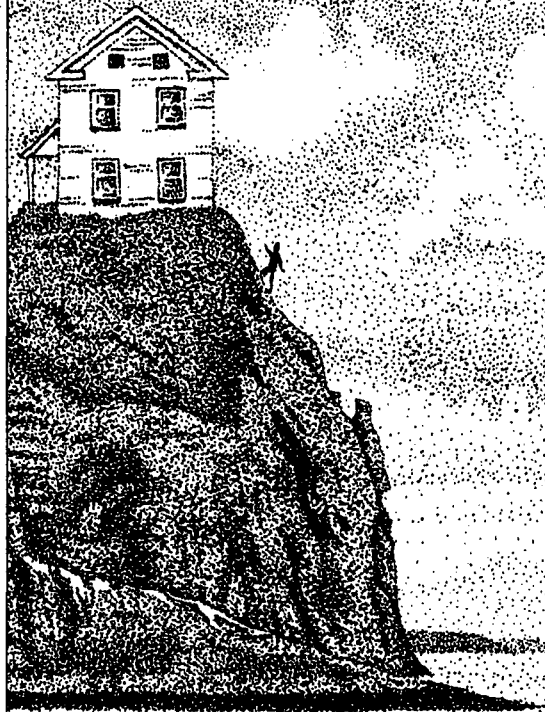


Illustration by David Monette

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 1/97

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I didn't discover the bodies, which is something I'd like to point out. Everyone wants to leap to conclusions and assume that I, Herbie Sawyer, thirteen-year-old kid from Manamesset, Cape Cod, found them. Truth is, I was working on a school newspaper assignment with my friend when *he* found the bodies. But that didn't change a thing in most people's minds; all they knew was that "Herbie Sawyer's done it again."

Which continues to make me look like I have this strange affliction—that no matter where I go or what I do I practically stumble over dead people. That's not true at all. I've figured it out: I'm just the unlucky victim of circumstances. I mean, I wasn't even *there* when Remmy realized what they were. Of course that didn't make a bit of difference to his parents; they still blamed *me*, as if I'd buried them myself, for crying out loud.

In fact, Remmy's parents were giving me a bad name just two days before the bodies were discovered. . . .

"Bad influence?" I shouted at him. "What do you mean your parents say I'm a bad influence?"

We were out on Quinicut Point, a slim finger of land that juts into East Manamesset Bay at its northernmost edge. Quinicut once tried to incorporate it-

self as a town back in the late 1600's, but for some reason—probably political—it got "absorbed" into the larger town of Manamesset instead. Today it's known as the "Quinicut section" of town, a little point of land dotted with wetlands, cranberry bogs, and grown-over farmland. There are just a few paved roads in Quinicut, and the one going out to the end of the point is a dusty dirt road. Tourist guidebooks and those pamphlets that the bed and breakfast industry puts out describe Quinicut as "one of the few truly unspoiled areas of Cape Cod left today." But personally I don't think it's very pretty at all. The only trees to speak of are junipers, scrub oaks, and pitch pines; the beaches are either rocky or covered by great stretches of mud flats; and the only reason the population is less than five hundred (in summer it swells to five fifty) is that nobody really wants to vacation in Quinicut, let alone live there.

So why were we riding out that way, Remmy with a backpack, me with a beatup Konica on a strap around my neck? Because we were on assignment for our school newspaper, going out near the tip of Quinicut to interview an old woman for our first feature article in the Manamesset *Mariner*.

Not an entirely original name, *Mariner*, but I missed the first

meeting of the Newspaper Club and didn't get to vote. I heard later some kids had wanted to go with the Manamesset *Mohawk*, but our advisor got real nervous, imagining all us newspaper nerds running around with weird punk haircuts, so she nixed the name.

"It's a lame name," I'd been bold enough to say at our next meeting. "Every club or school on the Cape has a newspaper called the *Mariner*."

That's when the advisor (who was also my science teacher, Mrs. Thalassa Filiades) fixed me in her icy stare and said, "Herbert Sawyer, Jr., I can't believe you said that."

That was Mrs. Filiades' reaction to most things I said that she didn't like. It had been her idea that we interview Mrs. Louisa Valentina, an elderly woman who lived in a strange old house perched on the edge of a bluff out on Quinicut Point. According to Mrs. Filiades, Mrs. Valentina was a nice old woman, an antiques collector and a local history buff who just happened to live in a house that was in danger of pitching right over into the sea from the top of a forty foot bluff. Despite repeated warnings from community officials that her property was a hazard and ought to be condemned, Mrs. Valentina steadfastly refused to move. I guess

she was what people politely call an eccentric.

So Mrs. Filiades arranged for us to interview Mrs. Valentina. She felt it would make a good "human interest" story, plus she probably wanted to get Remmy and me off her back. I don't think Mrs. Filiades liked either one of us very much. 'Course it didn't help that Remmy immediately stuck up his nose at the assignment:

"Interview some old lady?" he snorted. "What are we going to ask her? What kind of walker she uses? How many naps she takes a day? If she uses wetness protection?"

Now I might have said the name Manamesset *Mariner* was lame, which it was, but I'm generally not a rude or disrespectful kid. It's just the way I've been raised; besides that, I have a few close friends who are up there in age, so when Remmy made those remarks, I backed off, stared at the ceiling, and waited for Mrs. Filiades to lay into him.

"Remington Rogers III!" she shouted. "I can't believe you said that! Don't you have a grandmother living with you? What would your parents say if they heard you make such disrespectful comments? If you have no interest in serving on this newspaper and completing the assignments that you and

the staff have agreed on, you can tell me so right now."

"Sorry," Remmy muttered, his face turning bright red.

Apparently he looked contrite enough for her because she gave a kind of huffy sound, calmed herself down somewhat, and accepted his apology. Then she told Remmy and me what little she knew about Mrs. Valentina, the whole time giving Remmy dirty looks.

"You've got no common sense," I told Remmy later as we got our bikes, slung our gear around our necks, and started out of the parking lot. "You've got to *humor* Mrs. Filiades, go along with her. Don't you know *anything* yet? That's what you've got to do with *all* adults. God, Remmy, when are you going to learn?"

"Heck, I shouldn't even be going out to Quinicut with you," he whined as he tore open a juice pack and drank it down, one-handing his beatup mountain bike.

"What do you mean?" I asked. "You're not thinking of quitting the paper? This can lead to *big* things for both of us." I was starting to get mad.

"That's not what I mean, Herbie," he said. "What I mean is my parents aren't crazy about me hanging with you, that's all." And that's when he said, "They think you're a bad influence on me."

I nearly fell off my bike. I couldn't imagine anyone's parents not wanting their kid to hang around with me! Me! I've got to be the straightest, most normal, most average kid at Manamesset Junior High. I get good grades; I don't talk back; I don't do drugs; I don't smoke; I don't swear. In fact, I'm pretty boring, over all.

"Bad influence?" I shouted at him. "What do you mean your parents think I'm a bad influence?"

"They say you've got this bad habit of finding dead bodies."

"That's unfair," I shot back as I avoided a dead squirrel in the road. I kept pedaling right along so Remmy wouldn't want to stop and poke it with a stick. "Okay, once, twice . . . a few times that's happened. But it's not like I've ever *killed* anyone, for crying out loud."

I admit he kind of surprised me. Then I figured Remmy was just mad because we didn't get to interview the girls' field hockey team, which was playing a home game that afternoon. A couple of the other reporters had gotten that assignment: "Girl Sports Stars of Manamesset Junior High." It was the plum assignment we all wanted, and who wouldn't—interviewing a lot of sweaty girls in short skirts.

Remmy wiped his nose the

length of his sleeve and slowed down to spit at the side of the road. The kid had no manners, no common sense, and he swore like a drunken sailor—one of my mother's expressions. Sometimes I wondered why I hung with *him*. I have a girlfriend, sort of, and she absolutely detests Remmy. She's asked me what I see in him, and I really have no answer. Still, for his parents to accuse *me* of being a bad influence was crazy.

Though I do admit, like I said before, that there have been a few times—just a few—where I've had the misfortune of being in the wrong place at the wrong time. An older friend of mine, a retired signpainter named Mr. Hornton, told me once that I was simply the "unfortunate victim of a string of strange coincidences."

So, in a funny kind of way, I was glad that if anyone had to discover those bodies, it wasn't me.

But I'll get to that soon enough. . . .

We arrived at the home of Mrs. Louisa Valentina about thirty minutes later. She was a short, plump, whitehaired, pleasant-faced woman who greeted us at the front door with a plate of cookies. When I said she was short, I mean it: she was shorter than either Remmy

or me, probably four ten if she was lucky. She was standing in the doorway of this ancient two story, gray-shingled saltbox with a smile on her face and a plate of oatmeal chocolate-chip cookies in her hand. It was as if that's how she greeted everyone who came to her door, with a smile and a plate of food.

But from the moment we stepped inside it was nearly impossible to get a word in edgewise. She started right off by asking us our names, our ages, and what grade we were in, then exclaimed over how tall we were. From there she went into what a lovely person Mrs. Filiaades was and how they'd met at the funeral of a junior high school principal. After that she went on to tell us about her favorite subjects when *she* was in the eighth grade and how much schools had changed—mostly for the worse—in the last fifty, sixty years.

To which Remmy muttered under his breath, "Didn't know they had schools back in the Stone Age."

I stepped on his foot as Mrs. Valentina asked if we'd like to "look around a little bit, then sit and have some refreshments while we chat. How would that be, boys?"

"Yes, ma'am, that'd be fine," I answered.

This time Remmy made a

face and mimicked, "Yes, ma'am," with a snicker. I stepped on his other foot as we followed Mrs. Valentina through the rooms of her house.

Now, I've been in some pretty wonderful and strange houses. I've been in a house that has towers on either end and at least twenty bedrooms and sits on Little Icy Bay like a castle. I've been in shacks and shanties and big houses and little ones, and despite being only thirteen, I've managed to get around a bit, but this house was different in a special way; it was unique.

It was packed. Crammed. With antiques. With furniture that even a jerk like Remmy had to guess was valuable. There were cabinets and dressers and things Mrs. Valentina called highboys and chests she said were coffers, and chairs—so many chairs that some were stacked one on top of the other. There were Chippendales and Hepplewhites and Victorian overstuffed. As we followed her through her "front room," she pointed out one after another, telling us their names, the eras they came from, who made each and for what purpose. Then we entered what she called the sun-room, off the kitchen.

"Where we can sit and have that chat." She gave us a pleasant smile. "Imagine that, you boys are going to write about me

in a lovely school newspaper. Have you been working on the newspaper very long?"

"Yes, and *we*—especially Remmy—have a lot of questions for you," I said, urging Remmy to say something. He was too busy stuffing cookies into his cheeks. "He wants to ask you about the history of your house, the house on the water's edge." I gave him a quick dirty look from the corner of my eye.

"Now, that's a misnomer, Henry," she said, waving me to a seat at a huge tilt-top table she paused to tell us was solid oak, circa 1870. We settled down, Remmy with his cookies and notepad, me with my camera.

I'd like to make this perfectly clear: it was Remmy's job to do the interview; I was there as the cameraman. But there he sat, notepad and pen under his arm, munching on cookies, saying nothing. The guy was a number one, first class, grade-A jerk.

"This house was originally built on the edge of a marsh. But as you can see, most of that has been destroyed by storms and the sea, and even by us. All have left their mark." She turned to stare pensively out a pair of great bay windows that overlooked a narrow strip of lawn. I hadn't realized until that moment how close we were to the edge. Probably less than fifteen

yards to the bluff that dropped straight down about forty feet to the beach below.

She turned back to us. "One storm after another. Each hurricane and nor'easter, they all eat away at the bluff."

I decided to venture a bolder question. "Aren't you afraid . . . living so close to the edge like this? Mrs. Filiades wanted us to ask you about that." I nudged Remmy under the table; he just slid his chair farther away from me so I couldn't reach him.

"Afraid of what, Homer?" she asked, and before I could repeat my question, she looked at Remmy and said, "How about some iced tea, young man? Oh now, youngsters like you don't drink tea, do you? Well, let me see, I might have some nice juice. That lovely orange powder you mix with water. I bought it for my nephew's birthday party, oh, a little while back. I don't think we drank it all. I can look."

"Please don't go to any trouble," I insisted. "We have just a few questions and then—"

"Juice would be great," Remmy told her.

I glared at him.

"Let's see, it was the summer little Eddie turned fifteen, 1983. Or was it '84? No matter, there has to be some left. . . ."

"Tea would be better," I managed to say as she took a breath. There was no way I was going to

drink any powdered juice that was probably a decade old.

"Then tea it is. I'll be right back. You two boys make yourselves at home. Feel free to look around. Oh, and I'm sure you'll want some pictures of the house." She glanced at the banged-up Konica hanging around my neck. "I'll take you out front to the beach path when we're done. You can get some lovely pictures for your newspaper. Will that be all right?"

"Fine," I mumbled, turning to Remmy the moment she was gone. "Hey, aren't you going to ask her any questions?"

"She talks too much," he said; we could hear rustling sounds from the kitchen, water taps turning on and off.

"I guess that's your problem, isn't it?" I said. "Look, Mrs. Filiades said the real story is why she's refused to move this house. The local historical society offered to help, but she said no. They were going to pay for everything. This is supposed to be one of the oldest houses in Manamesset. Anyhow, *you* have to find out why she won't let it be moved. Don't you see, stupid? That's the real story here."

"You do it," he blurted out.

"I do what?"

"You talk to her. I can't get a word in—she won't shut up. You ask why she won't move

the house. Come on, Herbie, trade with me. Let me take the pictures."

"Damn it, Remmy, we agreed," I said sharply, snapping the cookie in half on what Mrs. Valentina had told us was "Fiestaware, circa 1930."

"Herbie, just this once," Remmy whined. "I don't know how to talk to old ladies. You're good at stuff like this."

"You live with your *grand*-mother, for crying out loud," I reminded him.

"Yeah, but we don't talk. She can't even talk much, just mumbles a lot because she won't wear her dentures. Come on, this is the last time I'll do this to you, I swear."

"All right," I muttered as Mrs. Valentina came back, this time with something she called ladyfingers. They were a kind of soft white cake filled with cream. I ate two or three before I started the interview.

If interview is what you want to call it. Before I could ask anything, we had to listen to Mrs. Valentina tell us about every glass, every plate, every fork and knife and spoon, every picture on the wall, and everything else, in the room right down to the rugs on the floor. That was what *she* wanted to talk about—her collection of antiques—not the house and why she refused to have it moved. Every time I

tried to bring it up—doing Remmy's job for him—she skillfully turned the talk to something else.

Her past. Her childhood. What things were like when she was a girl.

Stories about her father, about the history of the town. About what she was doing and where she was when she bought a certain piece of furniture, or inherited it, or got it at auction or a yard sale, or even from a dealer who hadn't "recognized its worth, but of course my father would have," she'd tell us. "My father was one of the shrewdest antiques men on the Cape. Now, this little end table, he got that for a song in 1948, and this one—" a small chest of drawers that looked pretty nicked and banged up—"he picked up for a pittance in 1952."

There was no doubt that this was one knowledgeable but garrulous little lady, and that her expertise in antique furniture, porcelain, fabrics, and dinnerware was extensive, but there was also no doubt in my mind that she was going to tell us about her house only when she was darn good and ready.

It was a good forty minutes later, as we were taking a tour through the back rooms of the house, gazing at lowboys and highboys, tripod tables, gaming

tables, and urn tables, sideboards and cupboards, that I saw I needed to take a different approach. Apparently Mrs. Valentina thought we were from an antiques magazine—either that or she was an extremely attention-starved little old lady who'd found herself a captive audience.

"So, how about this one?" I said, putting my hand down on a dresser-type table. It was about three feet tall, kind of fancy looking with funny overlapping butterfly shapes running in pairs down the front. It was varnished a bright gold color, and its drawer pulls were in the shape of metal tassels. "What is this one?"

"That, young man," she addressed me sternly, lifting my fingers off its top, "is a William and Mary walnut chest with inlays in boxwood combined with an oyster veneer, *and* with its original bun feet. It is a very rare and costly piece."

"Oh yeah?" Remmy couldn't see the look on her face; he was a bit to her side. "How costly?"

She gave him an equally stern look straight down the bridge of her pointed nose. "Ninety thousand dollars—at least."

"Damn." I pulled away from it, then paused as Remmy's eyes met mine. If this one piece of furniture were worth that much

And we were standing in a room crammed with such furniture. In fact, this room, which she called the side parlor, was so crowded with tables and chairs, dressers and "coffers," that we had to move sideways to get around them.

"Then everything in this house must be worth close to a million bucks!" Remmy cried excitedly.

Quickly I seized on an opening: "But aren't you afraid if a big storm washes the house out to sea all this will be lost? I'd hate to think of this—" I touched the chest lightly, with new respect—"floating out in the ocean. Wouldn't the salt water ruin it?"

"Are you certain you're working for a *school* newspaper?" she asked, eyeing me shrewdly. "You sound like neighbors of mine, Senator Suddard and his brother Joseph. They have much the same sentiment. They worry more about my precious antiques falling into the sea than they do me."

"You've got to admit, Mrs. Valentina," I said, returning her shrewd look, "there's a story here."

"Which I tend to avoid, yes," she said. "Let's sit out on the back porch and I'll tell you about my house . . . the house on the ledge."

*

“**A**s I said, the house was originally built on the edge of Great Mercy Marsh. But as you can see, most of the marsh is gone, just a few patches left here and there. It's been eaten up by the relentless power of Mother Nature.” She paused, sighed, and stared out at the open water beyond. We were sitting on a small verandah made of weathered barnboard and native fieldstone. The sun was starting to drop to the west; terns flitted across the long, low, mud flats, and the crooked necks of a pair of cormorants were visible, bobbing in the swell. The tide was moving out, probably the best time to take some photographs from below. I had to speed this up.

But before I could speak, she went on. “Most of the sand is gone, too, carried off by long-shore currents farther out. Of course, we humans did our share. A hundred years ago farmers grazed their cows on the marsh and filled it in in places. Others removed natural barriers out in the bay in order to widen and deepen it. In the process we destroyed the small islands that protected Quinicut. It's sad to say, but eventually all the point will be gone . . . but I plan to be gone myself before that day comes.”

She gave me a curious look,

then a quick glance at Remmy, who had lost interest and wandered off. He had walked to the edge of the bluff, possibly to see just how close he could get without falling over; now he was examining the statue of a large dog set about ten feet from the edge. It looked like a retriever, full size, with its head lifted and turned slightly toward the house.

Mrs. Valentina nodded toward it, said, “Now that piece there, the bronze dog, is relatively rare and probably worth quite a bit to a collector. When the house was built in 1840, the water's edge was over five hundred feet away. Ninety years later there was still a wide lawn here. It ran right to the edge of the bluff. My mother had a lovely row of cultivated roses there, the gentlest shade of lavender you can imagine, almost a mauve.” Her eyes looked wistfully across the remaining lawn, then fell on Remmy again. He was fiddling with the bronze dog's head. “The dog was originally positioned at the edge of the cliff, so we've had to move it back several times. Fortunately the senator and his brother are always willing to help out. They've moved it a few times. There was a brass telescope that fitted atop the dog's head, but it's gone now, broken, discarded.” She shrugged easily.

"I think I will miss it, too . . . when it goes."

"Why can't you move it again?" I asked. "Why don't you just move the whole house?"

"It's too late now, dear child," she said to me, adjusting her position in the chair slightly. "Heavy moving equipment would further weaken the ground we're sitting on. No, I made an arrangement that when the house goes I shall go as well."

"And all your antiques? Your . . . William and whatever chest? You're going to let that go over the edge, too?"

"My goodness, Homer, don't look at me with such horror in your eyes!" she exclaimed with a small laugh. "Of course not! I'm not over the edge—not yet, that is. I intend to give away my things, some to charity, some to friends, and the rest will go to my nephew Edward, who up until now has shown very little interest in my lovely antiques. Still, I expect he'll sell them off, too."

"Wait. You've got this all timed? You're going to give all your stuff away, and then what? Wait out some storm or something and let the house fall into the sea with you in it?"

"How melodramatically you put it," she said, a strange little smile inching across her pleasant, plump face. Then she

turned to face the sea; the water was deep blue, almost violet, and dappled with overlapping triangles of gold as the sun descended slowly in the west. "The house has done well; it has served its purpose. My father would have been satisfied. Oh my—" She glanced at me almost apologetically. "How silly of me, old woman talk. Now what about some photographs? You will be wanting some for your lovely magazine."

She had been speaking nonsense, as though I weren't there. Suddenly I had the unnerving feeling that she did this often. It was habit. What was not habit was to have a thirteen-year-old boy sitting beside her listening to it.

"I suppose so," I murmured, thinking to myself that now I'd heard everything, but also realizing we hadn't gotten what we came for . . . not at all.

I will never forget my trek down the side of that cliff—searching for a path that must have washed out years ago—despite Mrs. Valentina's insistence from up above: "Now, I know it's there somewhere. Oh, there used to be some lovely beach plums along the path. You be careful, Henry."

And me, stumbling, fumbling, and finding my footing on a small ledge of boulders that

moved several inches deeper into the sandy slope with each step I took. There were some little tufts of grass along the rough outline of what might have been a path that led to another nearly vertical path held together by some brambles that managed to cling to the side. Finally I found the remnants of a real path, though even here the sand and gravel slid underfoot when I paused and tried to photograph the house.

The problem was I really had to go to the bottom to get a good shot, even though I managed a few pictures as I tumbled and stumbled downward.

Of course Remmy was supposed to be doing this, wasn't he? Hadn't I traded jobs with him? So what was I doing blundering down the bluff, aware that at any moment one misstep could toss me onto the muddy, rockstrewn flats at the bottom?

No, he stayed at the top where only moments ago he had informed Mrs. Valentina—and me—that "I'm afraid of heights; they make me throw up."

'Course, this was news to me. I could have strangled him with the cord to the Konica. Instead I gave him a look that promised his life wasn't worth an anthill in the snow, then gamely went ahead, Mrs. Valentina insisting: "Now, there's a lovely path, just a bit steep, that runs down the

side, Hermie. Over to the left, just below where my mother's roses used to grow. Oh how I clambered up and down that path all summer long, picking lovely flowers, digging clams in the tidal flats . . ."

And so on, and so on. She watched from above, entertaining a suddenly engrossed Remmy while I half fell down the bluff, snapping pictures as I did.

Though I do admit this, once I made it to the bottom—with only one scraped knee and sand all over the seat of my pants—I think I got some pretty good shots. The tide was dead low, so I walked out across the mud into the shallow water, put the camera on zoom-focus, and fired away.

Then I had only to climb back up, thank Mrs. Valentina, and throttle Remmy, my so-called best friend. We didn't have the story we'd come for, but I'd had enough. Once I got to the top I wanted just one thing—to go home.

"This had better be pretty good," I warned Remmy as we went into the small room.

He made a hand signal to indicate I should drop my voice, so I did, repeating, "Did you hear me? This better be pretty damn good." I followed him to an old

black-topped table, an ancient and discarded lab table. Spread over it were black and white five by sevens of Mrs. Valentina's house.

But they didn't matter as much as this. "You see this?" I told Remmy, waving the hall pass in his face. "This is a bathroom pass. I told Mrs. Filiades that's where I was going, so if anyone comes in here and checks, I'm in big trouble—and if I'm in big trouble, then *you're* in big trouble, too."

"Will you be quiet?" he snapped, nodding at an interior door.

We were in a small workroom where the photography club held their meetings. It was in this oversized cloakroom, situated between the darkroom and the faculty room, where I suddenly heard voices, including the raucous laughter of my new English teacher.

It seemed teachers were always in a better mood when they weren't teaching class.

Remmy had grabbed me in the hall between periods three and four, telling me I *absolutely* had to meet him in the photography room in ten minutes. "I lied to Mrs. Filiades," I said. "I told her I had to go! During the first test of the year! She didn't want to let me leave, but—"

"Will you shut up?" Remmy finally said, punching me in the

arm, "Just take a look at these, will you?"

I was still nervous, my eyes on the connecting door to the faculty room. Remmy was here on a legitimate pass from study hall, but if I were caught—

"What's so important it couldn't wait?" I demanded, looking at the pictures.

They were black and whites, of course, and lay strewn across the table in no apparent order. I had to admit that I took a pretty decent picture: good contrast, good detail. Even the ones I'd waded out into the water to shoot looked good. The house looked like an aerie on the cliff and, from the angle I'd chosen, appeared even closer and more precariously perched near the edge than it really was.

"Nice, huh?" Remmy asked, and before I could say, yeah, thanks, he went on: "Steam did a good job, didn't he?"

"Steam" was Steamroller Rollins, actually Stephen Rollins, a senior who had but two talents. The first was the ability to move his tremendous bulk down a football field at a pretty good clip, mowing down anyone who dared threaten our star quarterback.

His second talent was developing crisp, clean, perfect photographs.

"Yeah, well, don't thank the

photographer, whatever you do," I snapped.

"Just shut up and look at these." That's when I realized he was behaving very strangely—seriously, no wisecracks—and he was holding a magnifying glass, probably stolen from science class. "Look at this one, and this one especially." He shoved two pictures toward me, two which I didn't think—on first glance—were as good as the rest. They were more what we'd call "close-ups"; shots taken as I stumbled my way down the nonexistent footpath to the base of the cliff.

"These are no good, Remmy," I told him. "The distance shots are the best. These can be chucked . . ."

"Look at this!" he shouted; I gave an anxious glance at the faculty room door. "Look!" He put his finger down on a shot of the cliff, the rocks, and the rubble which loosely held the side of the bluff together. "I'm serious, Herbie, you look at this white thing and you tell me what it is!"

"Roots, Remmy," I studied the object he had his finger on: the long, white, knobby root of some tree which had once grown at the edge of the cliff. The last hurricane surge that had washed in and taken a bite from the cliff had probably swallowed the tree as well. "Roots from some tree."

"Damn it, Herbie, what shape

are roots? Do they have these rounded edges?"

"I don't know, what the hell are you . . ."

"Look more closely!" He was nearly screaming at me. Of course *he* didn't care if a teacher from next door came in and found us—he had a pass to be here.

"What are you trying to say?" I asked, looking up at him, magnifying glass in hand.

"Roots? That is a bone, Herbie. A *bone*." He was looking at me very levelly, both of us leaning over the table, our foreheads almost touching, our eyes meeting.

"Hell it is," I snorted.

"And there's more. Look!" He slid out another picture, a close-up showing where a rain of rocks, boulders, and . . . something suspiciously round and white lay among the litter at the base of the cliff. It looked like a large, pale, ostrich egg among the gray boulders. "Now look back at that thing again—look!"

I found myself swallowing. "Nah, you're nuts."

"Bones. I know bones when I see them. And I think they're probably human bones. Look at this one—the one sticking out of the dirt. Look at the rounded end of it—it's a . . . a . . . something that fits into the hip . . . you know!"

"You've got too much imagination, kid," I warned him.

"Yeah? Well, my parents told me I shouldn't hang around you so much," he said in disgust.

"These aren't bones . . . and even if they are . . ." I started muttering my way through a half-reasonable explanation, afraid to admit he was right. The longer I looked at them—the ostrich egg-sized white boulder, the one, or maybe two, that were sticking out of the side of the bluff about five feet below the surface—the more they did look like bones. I started thinking I could see another one or two lying on the bluff like thin, white twigs. Ribs?

"If they are, heck, they're probably just animal or dinosaur bones . . . or . . . hey, what about an Indian?"

But I was starting to work up a sweat. The long bone with the rounded end sticking out of the side of the bluff was slowly looking less and less rootlike and more and more . . . bonelike.

"There ain't any dinosaur bones on Cape Cod, and you know it," Remmy sneered. "This whole place is just one giant sand pile left by the glaciers ten thousand years ago."

"Look, how come you know so much about glaciers and stuff? Didn't you get a D in Earth Science last year?"

"Just because I got a D doesn't mean I'm stupid."

"Indian bones, then. Maybe Mrs. Valentina's house is sitting on an Indian graveyard, like in the movie *Poltergeist* or something."

"I don't think they're Indian bones, Herbie. Wouldn't she know if she were sitting on a graveyard? We've got to go back there and check. If we go down the bluff and find this one, we'll know for sure." He indicated with the handle of the magnifying glass the round one, the one that resembled—somewhat—the top of a skull.

I have to admit I was slowly starting to get interested: "Maybe, if it is an Indian graveyard, that explains why she wouldn't let them move her house?" I looked at him hopefully. "Desecration of Indian remains and all that. Maybe she's part Indian."

"You know something, Herbie, you talk nuttier than me sometimes. We going back?"

I heard a footstep near the interior door, the heavy, deep tones of a gym teacher I preferred not to run into.

"Yeah, sure," I said as I opened the door leading into the hall. "You won't be afraid to go down the bluff this time?"

"Sure, Herbie," he insisted, his face flushed and excited. "I really wasn't afraid, I just had a

stomachache from all those cookies."

I muttered a word I don't want to repeat here, then said, "Put it back down." I glanced up at the side of the bluff, incredulous that I could have missed this, that I'd taken pictures of bones sticking out of the side of a cliff and not even known it. Wasn't I a man of detail? Didn't I take care to notice everything? Both my friend Mr. Hornton, as well as Jake Valari, another friend who's just incidentally a cop, would be real disappointed in me.

Remmy squatted down and replaced the yellowish, discolored skull he had just lifted off the stones. He put it back, upper side down, gently. The bottom jaw was missing. Then we both looked up. There was no mistaking it now, there *was* more skeleton up there; that was a femur, or thighbone, sticking out of the bluff. And if we looked carefully enough in the sand and rocks on the slope, we would probably find . . .

Ribs? The pelvis maybe? A humerus, radius, ulna—or two? The vertebral column? Maybe, or pieces of it.

Fortunately we knew enough to leave everything right where it was.

"I have to call Jake," I told Remmy. "Let's go ask Mrs. Val-

entina if we can use the phone."

And this is where I made a big mistake, something I should have known better than to do but something that proves I'm not perfect. Because as soon as Mrs. Valentina answered her back door, surprised to see us back, I dashed past her like a bullet, shouting, "This is an emergency, Mrs. Valentina, I need to use your phone!"

Which meant I left *Remmy* to explain what was going on. I mean, this discovery was so extraordinary! I was upset and excited and confused. If I'd only exercised a little . . . well, maybe restraint is the word, and taken the time to tell her myself, I might have learned something.

You see, it should have been *me* who spoke to her and told her what we'd found outside in the bluff because if she had anything to do with it, or had any knowledge of it whatsoever, I might have been able to tell from the look on her face. Was she horrified? Or surprised? Relieved or revolted? Or was she frightened? I wouldn't know, and neither would anyone else who questioned her later. She would reveal that first startled expression only once, and she would reveal it to Remmy Rogers, of all people.

But I didn't realize what a mistake that was until some time later.

*

People say that Jake Valari, Manamesset's only detective sergeant, is about the best thing that ever happened to Emily Sawyer, my mother. They met each other through me, and from my own observations, I think it's correct to say that the petite, dark-haired Emily Sawyer, widowed now ten years, and the burly, chain-smoking ex-Boston cop, divorced almost as long, were made for each other.

But it hasn't always been easy for my mother and me. We've had some tough times. For a while we had to get by on her salaries as a waitress and hotel chambermaid. We've lived in "winterized cottages," or cheap motel rooms in winter; in summer we've been lucky to afford what the locals charitably call "bungalows," roach-infested houses that most Cape Codders won't even touch.

There was even a brief period when we lived off state assistance. Then a little over a year ago my mother started dating Jake and things started to improve. Not only did she land a job with the local school department, but with Jake's help she got a "federally assisted" mortgage on a small, two bedroom house in North Manamesset.

At any rate, Jake and I were friends, as much, at least, as you can be friends with the man

who's dating your mother. And though I like to think there's a lot of mutual respect and admiration between us, Jake and I have had our ups and downs—the downs usually stemming from the fact that I tend to get mixed up in situations that involve sudden or unusual death.

But I don't go looking for trouble. As I said before, I just seem to fall into things. I'd avoid them if I could, which maybe I was trying to do that day, if only subconsciously. I didn't want to believe that a skeleton sticking out of the bluff below Mrs. Valentina's house meant a crime had been committed. Like I told Remmy, it could be an old graveyard out there in her back yard—one that erosion had slowly uncovered.

But when the police found that second skull in a small pile of barnacle-encrusted rocks, the skull with the bullet hole between its eye sockets, well, that kind of killed the graveyard idea. This was a crime all right, and a serious one, and whether I liked it or not, once again I was partly responsible for its grim discovery.

I wasn't surprised to see yellow police tape strung up behind Mrs. Valentina's house when I pulled up on my bike, or the long line of cars, vans, and trucks beside the dirt

road. There were at least a dozen vehicles parked against the wild brambles, grapevines, greenbrier, and other scruffy plants growing there. One car I knew right away: Jake Valari's red Mercury Firebird. Because Jake was a detective he usually used his own car.

It was early Saturday morning, and I had just snuck out of the house.

Last night Mrs. Rogers had my mother on the phone for the better part of an hour. On our end I'd heard my mother repeating, "Yes, I know. I'm sorry. Oh, is he really that upset? Nightmares? I'm so sorry."

It made me want to throw up. My mother was concerned enough without the Rogerses berating her—and me—for getting "poor Remmy involved in this situation." Though the truth is, I think the Rogerses kind of enjoyed all the attention; it had been Remmy the local news media contacted first. After all, he was one of two kids who, as the local cable news show put it, "guessed that some suspicious-looking white objects sticking out of the bluffs on Quinicut Point might actually be human remains." Initially I was overlooked, which was kind of a novelty for me, but later I wondered about that. Maybe Mr.—or Mrs.—Rogers had contacted the press themselves, though to

hear them wailing and complaining you never would have known it.

When my mother got off the phone, I tried to avoid her, but she kept looking at me strangely. Then she called her sister. I heard part of that conversation, too: "Yes, Clemmie, can you believe it? Again!"

Thankfully my Aunt Clem was a pretty reasonable person, and she convinced my mother that it simply wasn't my fault; that anyone could have stumbled over those old bones. It was a wonder no one had found them before. And as it turned out, the bones were old, at least forty or fifty years old, if not more.

Or so Jake had told us when he stopped by late last night. I hadn't asked him any questions, and he didn't have any for me. I'd forced myself to be silent, speaking up only to agree with him and Mom about how "weird" the situation was. Jake just had too little information to give—even if he could have—for me to start pumping him for it. After a while I'd wandered off and pretended interest in some inane television show.

Later I got hold of the phone long enough to call my girlfriend. I'd wanted her opinion; I'd also wanted her to sneak out to Quinicut with me the next day. She would have gone, too; she's the most outrageous girl

I've ever met. But she was gone, her mother had said, to spend the weekend with her father.

So I awoke this morning in the middle of a real dilemma. I didn't want to upset my mother, but what choice did I have? This had been my assignment, and I had to follow through. I mean how would it look if every newspaper reporter walked away from a story just because their mother disapproved? I really had no choice. I grabbed a granola bar, then left a note saying, "Gone out. Be back for lunch. Herbie."

Now here I was, making a mental tally of the vehicles along Quinicut Point Road. In addition to the Firebird, there was a black Geo, a pale ivory Range Rover, and a cobalt blue Mercedes with official state legislative plates. That startled me until I remembered Mrs. Valentina had said Senator Suddard lived farther on down the point. Must be him.

I recognized the medical examiner's blue Dodge pickup, and there was a green van with the state seal on the door and the words STATE HISTORICAL OFFICES. There was also a police van, two police cruisers, two state cruisers, and three news media vans, two of which had satellite dishes on top. One had the call letters of a Boston station, one was out of Providence,

and the third—more beatup than the other two—was from the local cable station.

With all the cars and trucks parked outside it was bound to be total confusion inside—and out on the edge of the cliff. This would probably be the best time for doing a little investigating, that is, for sneaking around. There was no yellow tape stretched around the front of the house, so I went up to the door, tapped on it lightly, then let myself in when no one answered. From the kitchen and other rooms at the back of the house, I could hear voices rising and falling, some talking rapidly, others slowly; there was even a little bit of laughter mixed in. This was followed by the quick, pointed voices of reporters, firing off questions all at once.

I don't think Jake would have allowed that; he must have been outside with the Scene of the Crime Team.

Then one voice seemed to override the rest, asking—or demanding—that one question be asked at a time. I guessed it was the senator's. I knew for a fact the police captain wasn't here; he never was around, and I hadn't seen his car outside. After being informed of the situation's status, he'd probably told Jake to "take charge, do what

needs to be done," then gone fishing off Nantucket.

I shut the door behind me quietly. I was in the front room, standing amidst sofas and sideboards, cabinets and cupboards, high chests, low chests . . .

"Anyone here?" I asked softly. What I wanted to do was get close enough so I could overhear what was going on. It was a cinch Jake would throw me out soon as he spotted me. I wanted to pick up all I could—for the newspaper of course—before that happened.

I stepped forward quietly, trying to hear, and then the voices from the kitchen stopped. Someone was talking in a fairly rapid and authoritative tone—some kind of lawyer talk about Mrs. Valentina's legal rights and a lot of other stuff I couldn't follow. That's when I was distracted by something—or someone—shuffling across the floor of the side parlor. I slipped through the front room and slowly eased into the doorway of the parlor . . .

To see a man on his hands and knees trying to move the William and Mary chest, the one with its original bun feet.

At first I thought he was a cop, crawling around on the floor in search of evidence. But what kind of evidence? Was it possible Mrs. Valentina was the front for some criminal gang? Was she hoarding antique furni-

ture that had been stolen by the gang—a gang responsible for the shooting deaths of the bodies sticking out of the side of the cliff?

Yes, maybe she was even the gang's leader, and she'd had two men killed, then stuffed down a hole in her back yard years ago, and it was only now that her vicious crime was being uncovered.

Then I realized how stupid that was; besides, the guy was muttering, "Damn it, this is the real thing," as he tried to move the heavy chest.

I guess it was the sound of my breathing that made him jerk his head up and demand, "Who the hell are you?"

He was wearing jeans and a worn brown sport jacket over a plain white T-shirt. His hair was short, reddish-brown; he needed a shave; and he had that look real criminals do on television: pinched-in cheeks, pouches under the eyes, and thin, dark, mean-looking lips. He didn't look healthy is what I'm trying to say, and as he got to his feet, I saw that he was a small, runty kind of guy. He looked like he was in his late twenties, maybe older.

"Just a kid," I said, shrugging. I hadn't wanted to draw attention to myself, hoping to remain undiscovered at least long enough to see Mrs. Valentina

and gauge her reaction to what was going on. Having screwed up already by losing the opportunity to see her first reaction, I hoped to see if now she looked or sounded nervous or frightened, upset, or merely fascinated by all this attention and commotion.

Because, you see, I wasn't a cop. And I was just barely a newspaper reporter. I had little access to any information in this case, if indeed it turned out to be a murder case.

"Just a kid, hey?" he snapped back, slapping his hand down on the walnut chest. "Do you realize what she's doing? Do you realize that she's giving everything away? Look at this, and this—" He spun around, pointing out another chest, one of darker wood, then a mirror stand, then the top of a large, rare, Tucker porcelain floor vase that stood about three and a half feet off the floor. "Every piece has a *name* on it. Do you know what *that* means?"

"No, sir, I'm sure I don't," I replied politely.

"Well, just take a look," he shouted belligerently, tipping the large vase to one side and indicating the bottom. "Well, go on, kid, take a look."

"Whatever you say . . ." I muttered, not wishing to draw the attention of anyone else. I bent over; there was a piece of sticky

notepad paper attached to the bottom.

"Well, damn it, kid, read it!"

"It says . . ." It took me a moment to realize there was a name there. "Sud . . ." I stood back up. "Suddard."

"William Suddard! Joseph Suddard! Don't you see what this means? I can't believe it! I can't believe she's doing this to me! Every single item here has a name tag on it! She's giving it all away to them! And what I'd like to know is *why*—" he leaned in closer to me "—she's doing it."

I didn't know who he was or what any of this meant, but suddenly I wanted to keep him talking. He hadn't sent me away; in fact he didn't seem to care who I was or why I was there. Apparently these labels had upset him too much. So he wasn't a policeman, detective, or investigator, neither could he be from the state. He had to be a relative or friend, and he was taking the opportunity to do some snooping around.

"I mean, I can't believe this. Do you know what just this one piece is worth?" He seemed to be on the verge of tears as he put his hand down again on the William and Mary chest. "Hell no, why would you know anything about it? You're just a kid."

"Around ninety thousand dollars?" I offered.

"No," he said with a moan, "Closer to a hundred grand. Just look at it, with the original feet." He ran his hand over the top the way you'd caress a dog you really liked. "But the label says . . ."

"Suddard. She's giving her stuff away to the Suddards?"

"Damn it, yes, but what kind of person goes around giving away chests worth a hundred grand? Oh, I should have seen it was happening. But I was blind!" He moved away from me, eyes darting from chair to chair, finally settling on a rather nondescript Windsor chair with a broken spindle. He fell into it, then head in his hands said, "She told me I didn't care. She said I had no appreciation for the finer things. But what did I know about old furniture? I was just a kid then myself. But now that I do understand, she doesn't care, says it's all been arranged, that I'll get my share. But what does that mean? That she's got my name taped to some old teapot or set of dishes she keeps out in the kitchen? My name's not on any of *these*!" He flung his arms out wildly.

"You're Eddie Valentina, aren't you?" I slipped in. "You're Mrs. Valentina's nephew?"

"I'm Eddie *MacDonald*, but yes—" he stuck his hand out to

me, and I took it "—I am Louisa's nephew and her only living relative. My grandfather was old Jim MacDonald, her father and the man who—" His face was filled with agony as he shook my hand. He had a surprisingly powerful grip for such a runty guy. "—did all this, who found these treasures and bartered and bought his way to . . . accumulating so much . . . beauty. But me, I'm just the no-account nephew who's lost his inheritance because he was such an idiot. I learned too late to appreciate, to understand . . ." He let go of my hand and, looking straight at me, asked again, "But who the hell are you? I don't suppose you're the local paperboy collecting this week's money?"

"No, me and a friend . . ." I paused, studying his face, trying to figure him out, then I corrected myself and told him, "I mean, it was me who found the bones sticking out of the cliff."

"You?" He frowned; he was puzzled. "Are you the one whose parents want to make a deal with the media?" He nodded toward the back of the house where the questioning voices had become a low din. "One of them said your parents acted like they'd found the bodies, not you."

So, a further insight into Rem-

my's home life? But I wasn't interested.

"I'm the *other* one," I emphasized carefully. "The one who really found them. That was my friend."

"Really." He nodded with false interest. "Well, listen, I guess this is all fascinating for you, but for me, it's a tragedy." He was up again, looking at the furniture, wandering through it, touching this piece and that, but always with his eyes turning sadly to the William and Mary chest. "I should have noticed long ago that they're always here. I don't think I've been to this house once in the last twenty years when they *haven't* been here. Oh, I know they bought my aunt out years ago, but they didn't buy these things. Just the shop and its inventory. So why does she keep giving things to them? Every time I see her, she's having something packed up, or there's a van outside waiting to take something away, a dresser, a chest, a mirror." He turned, stared at me almost defiantly; we were nearly the same height. "It's even occurred to me that maybe they know something about her, that they've . . . been blackmailing her all these years. Is that so farfetched? Or am I crazy? Now with these . . . these *bodies* out there and the police and . . ." Slowly, an eerie, almost malicious grin passed

over the thin mouth, bringing color to the gray cheeks. "Hey, maybe I've stumbled onto something. Maybe *you* stumbled onto something, what do you think? Have Attorney Joseph R. Suddard and his brother, the politically ambitious William K. Suddard—have they knowledge about those bodies you found? What do you say? Is that why they were the first ones here, after the police, that is? What do you think?" He moved closer to me. "You should have seen her when I got here. She was nervous, and if that's the case . . ."

Suddenly he threw up his hands, gave a groan, and turned away. "What am I talking about! I must be mad to even think it! Aunt Louisa a murderer? It's nonsense. If anyone, it was old Grandpa Jim who killed and buried them, but then I heard that medical examiner say that they could have been in the ground as long as a hundred years. So it may turn out to be nothing. A curiosity, a freak thing. They could be Civil War veterans for all they know."

"You heard them say that?" I asked softly. "Civil War veterans? Was this house in your family at the time?"

"How should *I* know?" he blasted back at me. "She said I never showed any interest!" But

then he sighed, slunk back into the chair, and looked at me almost apologetically. "Sorry, kid, didn't mean that. It's my own damn fault. I could have played the doting nephew and made it worth my while. I'm all she has, but it doesn't matter any more. She hates me, and she'll leave me a token in her will so I can't contest it. Like they say, you sow what you shall reap, right?"

"I don't think that's quite right," I said, "but I also think you're wrong. I think she does like you."

"Oh, come on, kid. How would you know that?"

"I interviewed her for my school newspaper. That's how we found the bodies, from some photographs I took." I settled on the edge of a Hepplewhite chair with a shield-shaped back and a stain on its seat. "She seemed to speak of you . . . fondly." It was a funny word, but it seemed to fit.

I wanted him to talk some more, even though I wasn't sure if all this was important or not. Unfortunately we could hear people coming our way. The reporters were leaving.

"Not a bad story," one said as he went by. "The bullet in the skull is a good angle." He barely glanced at us.

"Yeah," said another. "Hey, you think the old lady keeps a gun somewhere in all this junk?"

Then they were gone, Eddie MacDonald and I staring at their parting backs. I think he wanted to speak, but someone else was there, a man in a silver-blue suit and red silk tie, very expensive. He had a sharp look to his face and eyes. I put him in his mid- to late sixties, a slender, composed, but strangely self-important individual. There was another man behind him, dressed similarly but in dark gray; they could have been twins.

The second man hung back a bit, evidently talking to Mrs. Valentina: "Now you remember, Louisa, no answering any questions unless I'm with you."

But the silver-blue man was standing there staring at us . . . no, at Eddie MacDonald.

"Well, well," he said, his chisel-sharp gray eyes raking Eddie over. He never even saw me, I might as well have been a piece of furniture. "Look what the cat dragged in. The prodigal nephew, back again."

I'm just a kid, but I know arrogance, scorn, and sarcasm when I hear it; in this man's voice I heard all three.

"What's the problem, Eddie?" he went on, cruel laughter in his voice. "Out of cash again? Here—will this do?" He pulled a fat snakeskin wallet from his pocket and withdrew two twenties. "Will this keep you out of Loui-

sa's hair for a day or two?" He waved the money toward Eddie.

"You're cheating her, aren't you? You're cheating her and robbing her blind," Eddie MacDonald said.

"Now, Eddie, that's not true." This was from the second man as he eased his way between the other two. "We're very fond of your aunt. We'd never hurt her." This man had a less severe look to him and a gentler tone to his voice, but the resemblance between the two was unmistakable. Brothers. The Suddard brothers, the state senator in silver-blue, the lawyer in dark gray.

"He knows that," Senator Suddard said snidely. He still hadn't taken his eyes off Eddie. "He knows we care more about his aunt than he does. But he learned too late, didn't you, Eddie, that eventually we all have to pay the piper." He laughed coldly, then left, dropping the money on the floor as he did so.

"Eddie." Joseph Suddard raised his hands, seeing that Eddie wanted to lunge at the senator. "Not a good idea. Take the money and go, and leave your aunt alone."

Eddie backed off, but I heard him say, "Bastards," as the two men left the house.

Once again I blew my chance to see Mrs. Valentina, to read

her reaction, to see if she were frightened, puzzled, or just plain scared at the prospect of having two bodies found in her back yard. I suppose she'd have called them "lovely skeletons," or maybe I'm being cruel, too. Because the fact is the moment I stepped into her kitchen I knew the opportunity was gone. She'd left, was walking across the lawn toward the edge of the bluff with a tray in her hands. Cookies and ten-year-old powdered drink maybe, for the small group assembled there: local and state police, people from the medical examiner's office, and the rest, which included two men leaning on shovels and another with a rope and ladder. It seemed they were stymied, uncertain how to proceed with the extrication of remains that were buried in such an unstable location. Jake was there, too, his huge, burly frame overshadowing those of the smaller medical examiner, Dr. Watson, and a third person, a young woman who was pointing and shaking her head a lot.

I still could have walked out there, said, hey, what's up, do you have anything you'd like to tell a junior reporter? But in front of his peers and colleagues Jake would have had no choice but to send me home.

Still, I didn't even get to consider it because there was a

knock at the front door, and Eddie—whom I'd left in his anger and misery in the side parlor—was answering it.

It was Emily Sawyer, come to take her son home.

Funny thing was, she wasn't mad at me. Neither was Jake, who arrived a few hours later and stayed for supper. We talked a lot about trivial stuff, how I was doing in school, if I was going out for sports, that kind of thing. Jake complimented my mother on the meal, which really wasn't anything special, just hot dogs and baked beans.

The phone rang three times while we were eating. Mom answered each time, saying, "Sorry, you have the wrong number." The fourth time it rang, Jake insisted on getting it. His response was a bit more abrupt.

"News media, Herbie, trying to get a hold of you." He dived into his fifth plate of beans, his fourth hot dog. "Channel 8 that time. How many others?" He looked at my mother slyly.

She was up again, rinsing out the glass coffeepot. "I don't let Herbie take calls during meals. Case closed." She had her back to us.

"I can't tell them anything, Jake," I said, pushing my plate aside. I'd managed just one

plate; beans were not my favorite. "I don't know anything."

Jake gave me a strange look, not the hard-eyed glare he usually used when confronted with a situation—or person—he found difficult to comprehend. No, this was a thoughtful, pensive, even a little bit curious kind of look. Maybe it was because I'd been doing a pretty decent job of sitting on all my questions, waiting him out.

"It's driving you crazy, isn't it?" he finally said.

"Damn it, Jake Valari!" My mother cried, turning from the sink, coffeepot in one hand, foil bag of vanilla roast in the other, "You know damn well you can tell him! I went to get him this afternoon because I didn't think he belonged out there interfering with the police, but the whole story will be in tomorrow's paper." She plunked herself down at the table, pot and bag of coffee still in hand, confronting a somewhat startled Jake across the table. "I saw on the news this morning—before I got Herbie—that the police, meaning you, are going to ask for the public's assistance. Apparently no one has even a rat's ass of an idea who those two men are. They don't even know how long they've been buried out there. So I really think Herbie deserves more than this from you."

"A rat's ass, Emily?" He was smiling at her.

"You know what I'm talking about." She went back to making coffee.

"I did talk to Mrs. Valentina's nephew today," I offered, watching Jake's reaction carefully. "He said a few things that . . . maybe you should know."

"Eddie MacDonald was born in 1968. I think that makes him at least twenty years too young to be a suspect."

"I wasn't suggesting he was a suspect, Jake. I just thought . . ." This wasn't working.

"Emily, would you mind bringing the coffee outside?" Jake asked suddenly. "Herbie and I are going to take in some fresh air . . . and have a little chat."

And a little cigarette, which my mother detested. But out here with a cool breeze coming off the water, the smoke drifted lazily away from us. It was a "jeans and sweatshirt evening," as my mother put it, cool and pleasant, early fall on upper Cape Cod. Jake was quiet and waited until she joined us, bringing the pot of coffee with her along with packets of sugar and a pitcher of cream that she set on our worn picnic table.

"So what have we got?" Jake asked, then went ahead, answering his own question. "Parts of two bodies. Both male.

Both probably mid- to late twenties. The one you found first looks like a big guy; the other, with the bullet hole between the eyes, maybe a hair smaller. Both were close to, but probably not over, six feet." He looked at me out of the corner of his eye. I remained quiet.

"They were laid on top of each other, Herbie, buried together, so the odds are this is a double homicide. Doc Watson contacted an expert he met at some conference. You might have seen her out on the cliff with us? Dr. Abernathy, a forensic anthropologist who works for the state. She needs to do a lot more work; she wasn't crazy about the way some of the bones were found, tumbling down the side of the cliff. I convinced her that things hadn't been tampered with much, that was just the way they were found. We think most of the second skeleton, Mr. Bullet Hole, is still in the cliff. The other fellow—parts of him may never be found. Anyhow, she has a special procedure for digging up remains like this, uses the same techniques they do at archaeological sites. The problem right now is the stability of the cliff. It could give way any time."

He frowned, studied the tip of his cigarette, then looked over at me. The sun was starting to set behind his shoulders. I had

to squint to see his face. "What was I saying? Oh yeah, this Abernathy woman thinks they've been buried about fifty years. I don't see how she came up with that figure. We've got a couple of ribs, two skulls, some vertebrae, and part of one pelvis." Jake shrugged, apparently conceding there were some things he just didn't understand. "Oh, and one large humerus with extensive muscle scarring. You know what a humerus is?"

"Upper arm." I clamped my hand on my left humerus.

"Right. Anyhow, she's guessing two white males, Nordic or Germanic ancestry." He looked at me as though this needed explaining and I never read anything. "Big faces. High cheekbones. Cause of death of the first man, unknown. The other, probably shot at close range with a high caliber pistol, maybe a shotgun or rifle. Oh, she also found a few scraps of cloth but no buttons, no metal hardware of any kind. It's slow going; the edge of the cliff is very unstable. She's requested help from a geologist and a stratigrapher. Know what that is?"

"Soil expert," I said confidently. "Anything from the cloth scraps?"

"No, but if we find anything . . ." He smiled. "It'll be in all the papers. Your mom's right.

We will need the public's help on this one. Abernathy says around fifty years, but Doc Watson puts a ten to twenty year leeway on either side until more testing can be done."

Doc Watson was a nice man, a physician who had served as county medical examiner for the last forty years. It wasn't that I didn't respect him, but if a forensic specialist said fifty years, then I was inclined to go with that.

"And you've started a missing persons check?" I asked.

"Sure have. Checking up on anyone in the area missing from 1920 on up through the sixties. Anything else you'd like to know, boss?" He was being astonishingly open with me; usually I had to pry everything out of him.

"And Mrs. Valentina? Is she a suspect? They were found on her property. And what about her father? Or her husband? She must have had a husband—"

Jake cut me off in mid-sentence. "Husband never came back from the war, but that doesn't necessarily rule him out. Her father, Jim MacDonald, was a lobster and shellfisherman, also a hunting guide. Ducks. They used to hunt ducks out there on Quinicut back in the thirties and forties. He was also a spotter during the war,

you know, watching for enemy planes? I guess he made a bundle on a couple of estate deals and went into the antiques business in 1943. Did very well, had a real shrewd eye. Died in '62; the Suddards bought Louisa out in '82." He paused to take a drag on the cigarette, then looked over at my mother, sitting quietly, taking this all in. She wasn't happy about his smoking, but she was politely—just barely—tolerating it.

For a moment we were silent, Mom sipping vanilla roast, Jake enjoying a smoke in almost serene contemplation, and me watching the sun sink behind his back.

"The Suddard brothers," I heard myself whisper. I looked up, wondering if either of them had heard me.

"What about them?" Jake asked.

"I . . ." I studied him; there was a bright ring of sun just to his left. It was casting an eerie red glow against the white sport shirt he was wearing. But what to tell him? That Eddie MacDonald had some wild, cockeyed idea that the Suddards had been blackmailing his aunt? When Eddie himself thought it was a wild, cockeyed idea?

Or did I mention my theory about Louisa Valentina's being some crime syndicate boss-lady? And what if she pasted labels on

the bottoms of her things? If the Suddards had bought her antiques business—and she had a house full of antiques—didn't it make sense that she would give stuff to them? They were her neighbors and evidently friends of long standing. Who was I to suspect them—of anything?

I shrugged. "I don't know. I met them briefly and—"

Jake suddenly leaned forward, cigarette in one hand, coffee mug in the other. "And what?"

"I didn't like him much, the senator. He was . . . mean to Eddie MacDonald."

"A lot of people don't care for William Suddard." That was my mother, sitting back in her molded plastic chair. "He's been described as arrogant, egotistical, and self-serving. But the truth is, he's done a lot of good for the people in this community. He supports numerous good causes, like homes for abused women and children, animal shelters. He's donated land for a new park here in Manamesset, and he's built more ballparks and playgrounds—for public use—than any elected official I know of."

Jake was still studying me, saying nothing. I turned to my mother.

"You know what he reminded me of?" I said. "A bluefish. A bluefish as it swims in close to

shore at high tide, scooping up smaller fish in its mouth. I've seen them, Mom. They're absolutely voracious. Anything smaller and slower than them gets snapped right up. That's what Senator Suddard reminded me of."

Jake was still quiet, but when I turned to look at him, he was staring at my mother, nodding.

"Look, I know you're mad at me because I voted for him in the last election." Suddenly she was talking to him, not me. "His opponent tried to find something to slander him with and came up with nothing—nothing, Jake! Even the Boston papers admitted they'd never seen a cleaner record on any candidate." She turned back to me. "And you know very well, young man, you can't form an opinion about a person on just one meeting."

"It's instinct, Mom," I insisted. "He's not a nice man."

"He is a very *good* man," she said, her shoulders bristling. "I read about him years ago. Some people tried to ruin him then, too, said Bill Suddard avoided service during the war. What fools they looked when it came out that the senator received a deferral because he was his family's sole support. His father was a cartographer who died in a boating accident when Bill was seventeen. He took care of his

invalid mother until she died and made sure his brother Joseph finished high school. Then he turned his own life around, went to college. It took him years to build a reputation in local and state politics. But when he did, he never forgot the Cape, or Manamesset. I've seen pictures of what their home looked like when they were children—a tiny little place out on Quinicut Point. But they've built it into a lovely place with a large house and boathouse, and even a swimming pool to which they invite handicapped children in the summer!" And with that she stopped to take an indignant breath.

I looked over at Jake. He was staring at Mom, the distant, dreamy look still in his eyes. He took a sip of coffee. It didn't seem the time to bring up what Eddie MacDonald had said about the Suddard brothers.

But it also didn't seem that Jake was as enamored of Senator William Suddard as was my mother.

Suddenly my mother rose, murmuring, "We need more sugar," and went up to the house. But I felt the coldness spill out of her as surely as I would have felt a frigid winter's blast.

I seized my opportunity. "She said *he* turned his own life around."

"Bill Suddard was on the

highway to nowhere," he said, his voice distant, his attention on the house. "As my father used to put it, heading fast for jail or an early grave. No one was more surprised than my dad when he changed."

"He was wild," I said, a statement of fact. I understood.

"Talk of the town, 'course that's a little before my time. What I do remember are his first couple of runs for state office. I was about your age, and I remember folks' being amazed at the change in him. Someone said, I forget who, that Bill Suddard had gone from being a mean son of a gun to an angel in less than a year." He smiled at me uneasily. "But it just goes to show you a person *can* change. Go from drinking too much and driving too fast, from stealing and lying and vandalizing and being just plain mean, to become an upright and outstanding citizen."

"What happened?" I was truly amazed, but knew I had detected in Senator Suddard some of what Jake was talking about; the meanness was still there in the cut of Bill Suddard's mouth, the way he had talked to Eddie MacDonald. "And how come his political opponents didn't bring any of that up?"

"People will forgive a wild youth, Herbie, as long as it stops there." He tapped cigarette ash

into his coffee mug. "Heck, lots of people, judges, teachers, even cops, were wild and crazy when young." He grinned meaningfully at me.

We could pursue that some other time. "But most of them aren't mean, they're just being kids," I said. "They straighten themselves out."

"Well then, didn't Bill Suddard do just that?" he said, but there was still that look in his face, a look I now read as slight suspicion. The redness of the sun behind him merely emphasized it.

"You and Mom, you've argued about this before."

"According to your mom there's no finer man than Senator Bill Suddard. The day he announces his candidacy for governor she's going to be right there holding a banner."

"Eddie MacDonald says the Suddards are always at his aunt's house, that they're cheating her, taking her antiques, I mean. He feels he's being swindled out of his inheritance. He even suggested . . ." I watched Jake's face carefully; the light behind him was dying; it was nearly twilight. ". . . that maybe they're blackmailing her, that maybe they know something about those bodies and she's been buying their silence with the antiques she has left."

I took a breath, waited for his response.

"Eddie MacDonald is no prize himself, Herbie. It's probably just sour grapes."

"Yeah, maybe . . ." I glanced in the direction of our storage shed, an idea coming to me quickly. "Jake, I just remembered. I left my bike out at Mrs. Valentina's house. Could we . . . could you and I . . ."

"Well, how convenient," he said. This time I could see the glint in his eyes. "What the hell, I should take a drive out there anyhow, make sure everything's okay. I was thinking of putting an officer there in case some reporter gets the lamebrained idea of sneaking around in the dark; then I figured if someone's stupid enough to do that, they deserve to fall off a cliff. Go get your mother. We'll all take a drive."

It should have been a pleasant evening, an enjoyable visit back to the house on the edge and a chance for Mom to meet Mrs. Valentina, but the moment Jake turned onto Quinicut Point Road, a dark shape—a car with no headlights—came barreling straight at us. Jake veered sharply to the right, nearly running off the dirt road and into the brush alongside it.

"Damn it!" Jake snapped. "Did

you get a look at him? Did you get its plates?"

"No, Jake, I'm sorry . . ." I was excited but caught by surprise just as he had been. For a moment I thought he was going to whip out his portable light, stick it on top of the Firebird, and take off after the guy.

But not with us in the car. Grumbling and muttering, he pulled onto the road and headed out toward the point.

I could tell Mom was shaken by the incident; she was giving me quick, nervous looks over her shoulder. But that was nothing compared to what we found at Mrs. Valentina's house.

"Now what—" Jake started as he drove up, slowing the car down.

The front door was open wide with a figure standing in it, a man; he was waving his arms at us. I knew him right away as Jake jammed on the brakes, jerking the car to a stop.

"Joseph Suddard," I said, recognizing the man's slight build as Jake jumped from the car. Mom and I were behind him.

"Thank God you're here!" he cried out. "Something's happened to Louisa!"

We found Mrs. Valentina lying across the doorway of the side parlor. She was dressed in an old housecoat and slippers, lying on her left side. There was

a small pool of blood under her head, and she was breathing in a slow, agonized way. Next to her on the floor, in front of the William and Mary chest, was a gun, an old fashioned twelve-gauge shotgun by the looks of it.

Both Jake and Mom fell to their knees beside her, Jake crying out, "Herbie, call the station! Now!"

"I've already done that, sergeant," Joseph Suddard said, but I rushed off to the phone anyway.

"It can't be a coincidence," I said to my mother. "I mean, two days after we find the bodies someone tries to kill Mrs. Valentina?" It was cool out at the edge of the bluff. The first-quarter moon was halfway up the sky, casting an eerie, silvery glow upon the water. Mom had her arms crossed atop the bronze dog as she stared out at the sea. It was low tide, and the smell of decay rising off the marsh was strong and ripe.

But to those accustomed to it, the odor was barely noticeable. Our minds were on other things, like the ambulance and fire-truck that had responded to our call, and the two cruisers, their blue lights still flashing in front of the house, as well as the state police van, parked so its headlights glared toward the edge of

the bluff. There was plastic sheeting over the gravesite now, held down by some wooden planks.

We had watched the EMT's take Mrs. Valentina out. Bundled up on a backboard she had looked like a small child, frightened and disoriented. There'd been attendants with her, and Joseph Suddard had been there too, talking gently to her as they carried her out.

But for all we knew, he'd been the one who'd done it. That was the funny thing about all this. None of us knew what was going on. And none of it made any sense.

"All I know, Herbie—" my mother finally spoke in a low and solemn tone. She continued to stare across the silver-speckled water. "—is I wish you hadn't gotten involved in this."

"Mom, I didn't . . ." I stopped; she knew the rest.

"Besides—" She turned to me, one arm resting nonchalantly on the dog's head. It was tipped forward in the direction of the hole as though it were a pointer, not a retriever. "No one knows that someone tried to kill her. She wasn't shot, so she might have tripped and hit her head in the dark. Although it looks like that awful gun was hers; at least that's what Mr. Suddard said. Maybe she heard a noise,

Herbie, came downstairs, and tripped."

"Or got pushed. Or got hit on the head," I said, wishing to exclude no possibility.

She was quiet as we watched a pair of state troopers examine the gun. One of them had laid it across the hood of a cruiser. Both men were wearing surgical gloves and were handling the gun gingerly.

She sighed and leaned back against the bronze dog. "I suppose they'll do their ballistics tests," she said kind of sourly. "Determine if that gun was used to kill . . ." Her head inclined in the direction the dog was pointing. "It's so sad, Herbie. If she did it . . . or her father . . . it was fifty years ago. She must have been . . . thirty? Younger than I am now, and who knows why it happened? Maybe it was self-defense." Her eyes turned to look at me; it was very strange there in the dark with the dog behind her and the silvery moonlight framing her face.

"And maybe they were murdered. We don't know, Mom," I reminded her. "We're just guessing."

"And isn't that what Jake does? Or part of what he does?" she said. "Makes guesses and checks up on them? And maybe she has nothing to do with those bodies, but that seems very unlikely right now, doesn't it?"

"Hey, you two." That was Jake, approaching us swiftly. It was dark in the yard, but the pale moonlight revealed the concerned look on his face. "Officer Cairns can drive you home. I'm going to be out here a while." He was looking at her. "Sorry about this."

"As if you knew it was going to happen?" Mom said with a slight laugh.

"No mention of the gun to anyone." Now his eyes shunted over to me. "But I need to ask you something; in fact I have two questions for you. Where were you when you had that conversation with Eddie MacDonald?"

I could hear the absolute seriousness in his voice.

"Right where we found her. She calls it the side parlor."

"The window in there was open, and this was on the floor near a big walnut chest. Does it mean anything to you?" He took from his jacket pocket a plastic bag containing what looked like a large white moth. Opening it very carefully, he removed a small pad of notepaper. The top sheet was curled over like a dry leaf, and written on it in large black letters was the name E. MacDonald. I could feel Jake's eyes on me, waiting.

"She . . . puts labels like that on all her furniture and stuff. For the person who's going to

get it, I guess . . . if she dies or . . . I don't know, Jake."

"You said Eddie MacDonald was upset that he hadn't found his name on any of her things?"

"Look, Jake, this is crazy. Are you saying maybe he was in there tonight? Putting his name on . . . stuff?" I looked at my mother, as though she'd be more practical about this, "But if he did that, she could just put new labels on it, right? She'd notice and . . ."

"Not if she had said in her will that her possessions were to be allocated according to the names on the labels," Mom said. "And then died before she noticed someone had changed them." She looked at Jake with a grim smile. "I had a cousin I always suspected did that, changed labels, that is. My aunt said she'd leave me her Hummel figurines. Problem was, my Cousin Tillie's name was taped to the bottom of every one of them."

"Are you saying he changed the labels," I asked, "and then tried to kill her so he'd get all her stuff?"

"He drives a black Geo, Herbie. What kind of car just nearly ran us off the road?"

"No, I don't think he'd hurt her. I mean, she likes him . . ."

Jake was ready to move on; my feelings about Eddie MacDonald were totally irrelevant: "Second question, how did Mrs.

Valentina react when you told her you found some bones out on the bluff?"

I said that word, the one my mother dislikes, then quickly: "I didn't tell Mrs. Valentina. I'm sorry, Jake. Remmy did. I . . . was in such a hurry to reach you."

"Remmy." He said the name with a quick shake of his head, then: "Forget about it. Probably not important. Just remember, say nothing about this. I'll handle the press later."

"Are you going to pick up Eddie MacDonald?" I called after him, but he was already half-way across the lawn. He was done with me, but I shouted out, "And what about Mr. Suddard? He was here, too, Jake! Don't forget that. *He* was out here, too!"

It drove me crazy. Everything was going around and around in my head. Nothing connected, or if it did, it connected damned poorly. Could it be the Suddards were blackmailing Mrs. Valentina? At the same time that Eddie MacDonald was planning to murder his aunt—after changing the labels on all her valuable antiques?

What were the odds of two such separate scenarios occurring together? Or was Eddie MacDonald just a disgruntled,

unprincipled creep who was taking advantage of the situation to play his own hand? I knew kids like that. If there were a sudden commotion—a fight in the hall maybe, or a bomb scare—they'd stuff their hand in some girl's handbag and grab what they could, using the confusion around them for cover.

Is that what Eddie MacDonald had been doing?

No, I refused to believe it. There had to be more to it. And though there was very little I could do to help Jake, this I *could* do: find out what, if anything, Mrs. Valentina had said to Remmy.

Fortunately Remmy's parents went to mass every Sunday—without Remmy. So the next morning I waited down the street and out of sight until I saw their big ugly Oldsmobile drive by, then went up to their door.

He didn't want to let me in. "Hey, I can't talk to you right now," he said while chewing on a bagel. I pushed the door in on him, smashing him against the side of the refrigerator.

"You jerk!" I shouted. He pretended to be gagging.

"My parents won't be happy about this," he warned.

"Your parents won't be happy until they get paid for you to talk." I'd finally had it with him. "Who do you think you are?"

"They want me to find some new friends, too." He was holding onto his throat. What an actor.

"So what. Find some. But before you do, I have something to ask you. What did Mrs. Valentina say to you when you told her we found those bones?"

He waved a bagel in the air. "I'm not supposed to talk unless my lawyer's with me. My parents told the police that and they left, but they'll be back, they'll be—"

"Hell they will. They don't care about you! They don't care what you might know, either." I moved closer to him, and he stepped backward into his cat's water dish.

"No." He was shaking his foot. "My dad says they'll be back. We're going to do an interview with this guy from Channel 8."

"Listen, you jerk!" I grabbed hold of his collar and dragged him right up to my face. "If the police thought you knew anything important, they'd have dragged you down to the station house by now and beat it out of you with a rubber hose. They do not care what you know, Remmy. They do not care."

"Yeah?" His bottom lip was trembling, and the bagel dropped out of his hand. "Then why are you here?"

I kind of pushed him back, like tough guys do on television.

"Because I'm not the police, that's why. So you have no choice but to answer my questions, Remmy, or I'll beat the crap out of you."

"Jeez, Herbie, you don't have to get so mad." He plunked himself down in a kitchen chair.

"What did she say? How did she react? When I was calling Jake, you talked to her. Tell me!"

"She said . . . she said she didn't know there were any bodies there."

I waited, hanging over him like the blade suspended on a guillotine. "And?"

"And that's it. That's all!" Suddenly he looked genuinely afraid. I decided to ease up on him.

"Okay, so *how* did she say it? Give me her exact . . . emphasis." I was thinking fast; maybe it didn't matter. Maybe Jake was right. "Repeat it to me slowly, word for word, exactly as she said it."

"You're crazy, you know that?"

"Do it." I leaned closer to him.

"*I didn't know—*" he eyed me carefully, exaggerating the emphasis on every word "*—there were . . . any bodies . . . there.*"

"I'm sure she didn't say it like that. Do it again."

"Damn it, Herbie!" He sat back, shut his eyes, then said, "Okay, okay, here's how she said it. 'I didn't know . . . there were

any . . . bodies *there.*'"

"You sure?"

"Oh, come on, that's how she said it. I swear!"

"And how did she look?"

"Look? Well, kind of scared, I guess. Wouldn't you be?"

"Yeah, I guess I would be." I turned to go. "Thanks."

"Hey, Herbie."

I figured he was going to try to scare me, say he was telling his parents about this the minute they got back. Instead, he said, "Hey, we're still friends, aren't we?"

For the fourth time in four days I was back out on Quinicut, leaving my bike next to the front door. No hiding this time. And I ignored the looks of the state troopers, the two local cops, the other guys in work uniforms who were standing around not doing very much of anything. But no one stopped me or spoke to me as I crossed the back lawn and walked toward the hole.

"Jake?"

He turned, surprised—and not surprised—to see me. It was an act, including the speech he was about to give. I cut him off, dealing with him as quickly and as coolly as I had Remmy only minutes earlier. "I don't know what you've learned since I saw you last, Jake, but I do know

this: Mrs. Valentina knew there were bodies buried in this yard, but she didn't know *where* they were buried. Which means she knows who they are and probably who killed them. If the Suddards are blackmailing her, that's a whole other story, but I think murder takes precedence over blackmail every time. Am I right?"

"Sergeant?" That was the forensic anthropologist, motioning to him from the hole.

He ignored her and looked at me.

"How do you—" he started, then stared sharply at me. He knew I wasn't lying; everything about me told him so, my face, my eyes, right down to the way I held my body. In fact I was so right and so serious I would have willingly turned away and left, content to give him this piece of information and nothing else.

"Sergeant." This was another voice; someone approaching from behind me. "Got some answers for you."

I recognized Officer Cairns without turning around. He was the nice but guarded fellow who had driven Mom and me home last night.

But now I would have to leave. I felt a sigh rise up inside my chest . . .

Then evaporate just as swiftly as Jake looked at Officer Cairns,

nodding his head ever so slightly. It was the signal for him to continue.

"No fingerprints on the windowsill, sarge. No footprints outside it either. The window was probably opened from the inside. We spoke to Mr. Suddard. He doesn't think anything's been taken, but he's not sure. I got a list of persons who've been in there the last week or so. Kind of long. It includes both Suddards, the nephew, a couple of workmen who moved some pieces of furniture, and even . . ." I felt the man's eyes drop on me.

At Jake's nod, the man went on. "Ballistics tests on the shotgun are still incomplete, but the size and caliber are compatible with the hole in Skull Number 2. Or so say the experts. An old Remington shotgun, apparently belonged to Mrs. Valentina's father. Only one set of prints on that, probably hers, but state forensics also found traces of blood and hair on the rifle butt. You were right about that."

Jake nodded again. I moved aside and watched Officer Cairns look up from his notepad. His expression grew grim. "I guess she's in pretty bad shape. Might not make it. They're airlifting her to Providence this morning."

Jake didn't react, just looked

at the man until he composed himself and continued.

"As for Edward MacDonald, we've got him at the station. Says he went to bed early last night with a headache. Woke up this morning to find his car stolen." There was just a hint of irony in the man's carefully controlled voice. "Lives in a converted hotel over on Seaside Avenue, bog country. We're checking his story out, talking to his landlady, neighbors. He says he knows nothing about switching labels on any furniture but did seem concerned about his aunt. Could be an act. Oh, something else . . ." Just a bit of a sigh. "Senator Suddard's been calling the station, demanding to know when we plan to arrest MacDonald. Been a nuisance, sergeant, but we can't put him off forever."

"Sergeant Valari?" The woman who'd called out to him was walking our way.

"Find MacDonald's car," Jake said. "Then get both Joseph and William Suddard on the line." He turned to me as the woman stopped behind him; she had something in a glassine bag and was tapping her foot impatiently. Jake ignored her and said to me, "I want you to go home." His stare was steady, indicating he would tolerate no interruption, no complaint, no protest. "Come back tonight, six sharp. Do you

understand?" He started to turn away, then looked back at me, adding as though it were an afterthought, "And bring your mother with you."

This time we were ushered into Mrs. Valentina's house by two state troopers, their faces wooden and unsmiling under their wide-brimmed hats. From the front room we were conducted toward the back by Manamesset officers Cairns and Andersen, the expressions on their faces equally taciturn.

We had spent a nerve-wracking afternoon, Mom off and on the telephone with Aunt Clem, me off and on the homework assignments I had spread wildly across my bed. Neither of us had been able to concentrate on anything for very long. When we finally left our house at five forty-five, it was with a sense of relief . . .

Soon to be replaced by nervous apprehension once we saw the police barricade at the end of Quinicut Point Road. A trooper there started to wave us away, then paused and let us through after checking his clipboard. This started an angry clamor from a group of reporters held back by the roadblock.

"Is it true they found two Nazis buried out on the cliff?" one of them shouted at us.

Or at least I think that's what he said.

Now we were being escorted into Mrs. Valentina's sunroom. The windows were open, a breeze coming off the water through them. A handful of people were sitting around the tilt-top table:

Eddie MacDonald, his legs crossed, his expression annoyed as he tapped his shoe with a pencil. Beside him, Doc Watson in his Red Sox baseball cap, leafing through a notebook. Across from them, Joseph Suddard staring out the dark windows, and Dr. Abernathy, with a bored expression on her face.

She was the only one who noticed us come in, her sharp eyes lifting to give us a quick once-over.

Mom went to sit at the other end of the table and, mimicking Dr. Abernathy, leaned back and folded her arms across her chest. No one said a word.

Officer Andersen was also there, stationed at the doorway. He gave me a nod of recognition. Officer Cairns was just outside the room with a small paper bag in his hand.

"Does anyone know what the hell is going on?" Eddie MacDonald suddenly said.

"Yes, I'd like to know that myself," said Senator Suddard as he came in, quickly glancing around but barely seeing us. His

gaze even skidded past his own brother. He turned to address Officer Andersen rather sharply. "I demand to know what's going on here, officer. Some of us do have an agenda. Myself—" He turned his wrist to look at his watch, probably a Rolex. His entire attitude was one of impatient indifference. "I have an important fundraiser to attend in Chatham. Even if I leave now, I'm going to be late."

As Officer Andersen was about to answer him, someone else spoke:

"Sorry to keep all you fine people waiting."

It was Jake, coming up behind me, his hands on my shoulders as he whispered, "I've always wanted to say this, Herbie. Have a seat and watch."

For a moment he stood, waiting for me to take a seat, and waiting, as it were, for the atmosphere to settle in on us. The wind was dying down, and the sea beyond the windows was drenched with sunset: red and orange, yellow and violet. But I knew what Jake was going to say; I could feel it, anticipate it

"I suppose you're all wondering—" he paused; everyone held their breath—"why I asked you here tonight." His eyes scanned each of us quickly.

And for a moment it was like a scene out of an old English mys-

tery movie: the suspects gathered in the drawing room waiting in suspense and apprehension; the capable and clever inspector with his assistants standing ready with their carefully collected evidence; and then the careful and artful explanations, followed by the denouement, the truth revealed, the mystery solved.

"Oh, damn," the senator drawled. "And pardon my English, ladies, but spare us the theatrics, sergeant. Evidently you've asked us all here and we've been good enough to comply, but is this really necessary?"

"Senator." Jake wheeled around on him, smiling strangely as he did. "Do you know Drs. Watson and Abernathy? Of course you do. And Mrs. Sawyer." A nod to my mother, then me. "And her son, Herbert. Oh, and of course, how could I forget. Officer Andersen?"

And before the senator could react, Officer Andersen was escorting an elderly woman with a small, soft face and a head full of white hair into the room.

"Mrs. Derry, everyone," Jake finished, guiding her to a chair.

"Mrs. Derry?" That was Eddie MacDonald, leaning forward, then explaining to us quickly, "My landlady?"

"Eddie." She nodded at him pleasantly as she sat down.

"All right, sergeant, I've had enough of this," Senator Suddard barked, still standing. "If this is some kind of foolish game, I'm really not in the mood for it—"

"No games, senator," Jake said to him, his expression and mood darkening just as the sun dipped below the horizon beyond. As if on cue, Officer Andersen turned on the Tiffany lamp hanging over the table. "Just a little story, a tale of murder, attempted murder, and blackmail. I don't think any of those are games, do you?"

The senator wasn't about to back down so easily: "Look, it's obvious to everyone that he—" he turned, pointed at Eddie MacDonald "—came back here last night, changed the tags Louisa had on her most valuable items, and then tried to kill her. That he didn't fully succeed is a testament to his continuing inadequacies. I told your aunt—" he was addressing Eddie directly now, his gray eyes blazing "—you weren't to be trusted. And I was right."

Eddie leaped to his feet, the senator stepped forward, and immediately Jake was between them.

"Sit down," Jake said, first to Eddie, then to the senator. "Sit down now."

Grudgingly the two men obeyed.

"Let's begin with what in a court of law might be known as Exhibit 1," Jake said, "which you may have noticed parked outside in the road." His gaze fell on Eddie. "A 1994 black Geo sedan, slightly dented in front, which my men pulled from the ditch of a cranberry bog about an hour ago."

"It was stolen—" Eddie began.

Jake put up a hand; Eddie was quiet. Jake went on. "A cranberry bog located off Seaside Avenue, not far from an apartment complex owned by Mrs. Patricia Derry." He looked at the elderly woman. She was smiling, apparently enthralled to be there. "Is that so, Mrs. Derry? The property at 323 Seaside? And your tenant at 323B is a Mr. Edward MacDonald?"

"Yes, oh yes," she said, hanging on his every word.

"Thank you, Mrs. Derry. We'll get back to you," Jake said. He turned to Joseph Suddard, who'd been quiet thus far. "Exhibit 2, the key to this house." He opened his palm to show a plain gray key. "However, this is not the key I am looking for. This one is Louisa Valentina's, taken from the key rack in the kitchen. No, the one I want is the one you used, Mr. Suddard, to enter this house last night. You do have one?"

"Yes, I do, sergeant," Joseph Suddard said with a heavy sigh,

"but I didn't use it last night. I seldom do." He paused. "I often come up here in the evening, that is, I live just down the road, and it's quite reasonable for me to visit." He was looking around at the rest of us now. "Louisa's a neighbor. We often have tea and talk about antiques. She gave us a key so we could let ourselves in if there were a problem."

"You and your brother have known Louisa for a long time, haven't you?" Jake asked.

"Over fifty years, sergeant, since we were children."

"So how did you enter the house last night without a key?" Jake asked him. "Did she let you in?"

"No, no. The door was open, and I let myself in and . . . found her." He dropped his head.

"So the door was already open," Jake said. "Did she unlock it?"

"I don't know." Joseph Suddard was lifting his head slowly.

"Oh, damn it, sergeant," Senator Suddard snapped. "Evidently the thug—" he glared at Eddie—"who broke in through the windows ran out the front door when he heard my brother coming. What is so hard to figure out?"

Jake just looked at him. "Exhibit 3." He reached behind him. Officer Cairns took something from the paper bag and handed it to him. It was the plastic bag

holding the sticky notepaper. He turned to Eddie. "Do you recognize this?" He held the bag out, and Eddie took it, realizing instantly what it was. "Is it yours?"

"Of course not. I mean, it's not even my handwriting."

"Exhibit 4," Jake moved on, turning to Officer Andersen, who handed him a police-issue shotgun. "The Remington 12-gauge, belonging to James MacDonald."

"I knew Jim MacDonald," Mrs. Derry said dreamily.

"I'm sure you did," Jake said. "At any rate, this will have to substitute for the shotgun found beside Louisa Valentina, with her blood and hair on it here . . ." He indicated the butt. "Now if we put together a possible scenario, it could have happened something like this: Louisa is upstairs and startled by a sound. She comes downstairs with her father's gun. However, when she realizes who has made the sound, she puts the gun aside, perhaps on a table or chest. It is then that this person, whom Louisa has every reason to trust, distracts her, grabs the gun, and then strikes her—" he demonstrated, lifting the gun and slashing the barrel downward—"in the back of the head. As she lies helplessly on the floor in her own blood, this person leaves this . . . either acci-

dentally . . ." Jake's eyes were on Eddie as he retrieved the pad of paper " . . . or deliberately, in order to cast suspicion on the unfortunate Eddie. After which the window in the side parlor is opened, obviously to make it appear that entrance was gained that way, which we know it was not. At any rate, the intent was obviously murder. Would anyone disagree?"

"The only thing I disagree with are your methods," Senator Suddard grumbled.

"And you, young man, had a motive." Jake was addressing Eddie MacDonald again. "And, from what we can discern, ample opportunity."

"I went to bed early. I told you. I had a headache. I don't have a key. And someone stole my car," Eddie insisted.

"Yes, I know. We're running a hair and fiber analysis on your car," Jake told him, "despite the fact that it will prove nothing if you were the one who tried to kill Louisa. We'd expect to find your hair in your own car, wouldn't we? But would we expect to find someone else's? Maybe not. It all depends on *whose* hair we find, doesn't it? Say, someone who . . ." He turned to the woman. "Mrs. Derry, tell me again what color the car was you saw? The expensive car, you said it was, parked off the maintenance

road that runs through the cranberry bog? You were walking your dog, you said."

"Blue," she said with a magnificent smile. "Deep blue, like the sea in winter."

"Ah, blue, an expensive blue car. Say . . . like a Mercedes?" Jake said, his voice dropping to a near whisper.

But I don't think Mrs. Derry would have known a Mercedes if one had run her over.

It barely made a difference because Senator Suddard was on his feet. "Damn you, you small town cops are all alike! I won't sit here and let you lead the witness this way! And I won't be accused of something I didn't do!"

"Witness?" That was Joseph Suddard, turning to his brother in surprise. "William, this is not a court of law, not even an inquest. We were *asked* to come here tonight."

"Asked?" the senator answered, his voice trembling, "Forced to come, more like it!"

"You needn't have obliged the sergeant, if you didn't want to," Joseph Suddard said. "You could have refused."

"And have it look as though I were guilty of something?" the senator roared.

"Didn't see one little old lady and her dog, did you? You tend to overlook quite a lot of things," Jake was saying, his voice sur-

prisingly calm. "But she saw you."

"The hell she did!" Senator Suddard barked, but then he looked at Mrs. Derry's face, her nodding head. "This is crazy! This is preposterous!" He was confronting Jake. "If you want to charge me with something, then do so! But read me my rights! Because, damn you . . ." He spun around to confront his brother. "Joseph, tell them I don't have to answer one question unless I am formally charged and my rights are read."

"Tell them yourself, William," Joseph Suddard said, rising. "I resign as your lawyer."

"Resign! What the hell are you saying?" William Suddard cried. "You can't resign! You're my brother!"

"With the bodies discovered, your reasons for blackmailing Louisa were gone, weren't they? You could no longer force her to give you her most expensive antiques in order to buy your silence." Jake's voice was speeding up; he could see Eddie from the corner of his eye—a livid Eddie MacDonald, ready to lunge at William Suddard. Swiftly Jake motioned Officer Cairns to step in front of him.

The senator, confused, indignant, enraged, turned to look at Jake. "What the hell are you talking about?"

"This." Jake took a second plastic bag from Officer Cairns's hand, and as he did so, both Drs. Watson and Abernathy leaned forward expectantly. "Tell the good senator what is in this bag, doctor."

Dr. Abernathy, young, exuberant, and very excited, stepped forward to take the bag from Jake's hand. "It's a piece of ribbon." Opening the bag, she shook a tiny, soiled, and faded red, white, and dark-bordered ribbon onto the table. "We found it this morning on a piece of fabric taken from the gravesite. It was pushed through a button-hole." She paused as Eddie, Jake, both Suddard brothers, and even my mother leaned in to get a closer look. "It was used to hold a medal given during World War II. The medal itself wasn't worn every day, but the ribbon was, to indicate the owner was a recipient of the Iron Cross, a decoration given to German soldiers and sailors."

Jake started in right after her, never missing a beat. "Jim MacDonald was a spotter during World War II; he watched for submarines, or U-boats, using the telescope stuck in that dog's head—" Jake pointed dramatically at the dog silhouetted on the bluff. "Fifty years ago he saw two men come ashore from a U-boat, two men he later killed and buried in this yard.

And you knew about it." He was looking at the senator. "You witnessed it, or you learned about it somehow. Louisa knew about it, too. Her father must have told her he buried them in the yard, but he never told her *where* they were, possibly for her own protection. But you knew, didn't you?"

"You are crazy, absolutely crazy," William Suddard blurted out like a madman as he stepped back from us, the small group that had been huddled forward to look at Dr. Abernathy's grim find. "Me? Me blackmailing Louisa? Don't you know anything, man? *She's* been blackmailing *us*! For fifty years! Tell them, Joseph!" He was almost crying, or was it laughter?

I couldn't tell, just knew I felt my mother's arms around my neck suddenly, clutching me so tightly I could barely breathe . . . And then the senator was crying and falling back into his chair, tears running down his cheeks as he said over and over, "Tell them, Joseph. Tell them. Tell them how sweet little Louisa has been blackmailing us for fifty years . . ."

"I understand why you did it this way. There was so much you didn't know."

Joseph Suddard was seated at

the table, his hands clenched in a hard knot atop it.

"I know your brother saw an opportunity and seized it. Can you deny that?" Jake said.

Everyone was gone now. Drs. Watson and Abernathy, Eddie, the police officers. The senator had left in the custody of the state police. Only we were left, Joseph Suddard and Jake, Mom, and me. "Tell me first if Louisa is going to make it," Joseph Suddard replied.

"Tell me this before I do—when you found the door open, you knew your brother had been here, didn't you?"

"Sergeant, my brother was stealing cars before he was twelve. A thief, yes he was, but I truly did not think he was a murderer."

"Or a blackmailer?" Jake asked. "Can you explain that to me?"

"Ah, because of the two dead Nazis." Joseph Suddard smiled strangely. "You thought my brother was blackmailing Louisa because he had knowledge of those bodies."

Jake nodded. "And with the bodies uncovered, there would be no more blackmail. She would finally have to tell the police what she knew, about what her father did fifty years ago."

"Tell the police what? That her father shot and killed two German intelligence officers

who trespassed on American soil? Despite your cleverness, you've got it backwards. William was right. Louisa has been blackmailing us.

"Our father was a cartographer," Joseph Suddard said, "as you know. He mapped every inch of this shoreline as far south as New York Bay. When he died, he left a house full of nautical maps, or charts as they're called. I don't know how William was contacted, supposedly through a Canadian fisherman he met. A collector he knew was interested in buying those charts. The only problem was that they were charts of the eastern coastline, and we were at war. In other words, such a transaction was illegal, and William knew it. So the plan was to meet this 'collector' at our dock, on May 9, 1943, a date your quite capable forensic scientist would love to hear."

Suddenly I spoke up. "And Mr. MacDonald, with his telescope, saw them come off a sub."

"You are a bright boy, aren't you?" Joseph Suddard said to me. He turned to look at Jake. "Jim MacDonald knew something was wrong, so he got out his gun and got in his old truck and drove down the road to see what it was. What he found were two boys, one eighteen and very sure of himself, the other fourteen and not so sure, argu-

ing with two Germans, or Nazis if you will. They refused to deal with us. Oh, they had a big suitcase of money, sixty thousand American dollars in old, unmarked bills, but I have no doubt in my mind that when they saw we were just kids they planned to take our maps, keep the money, and kill us."

"Mr. MacDonald had to kill them." That was my mother, sitting with a blank look in her eyes.

"Yes. One had taken hold of me and put his pistol to my head. He told William to put the maps in the boat. They had a little inflatable craft. But old Jim . . . well, Jim was a crack shot. He took one between the eyes. The other . . ." He paused, sighed. "Look for damage in the midsection. Anyhow, Joe had us put the bodies in his truck; then he took the maps and the money. He told us to stay put and that he'd return. We were so scared, even William, that we didn't move all night."

"But I still don't understand," Jake said. "You're saying that Jim MacDonald . . . and Louisa? Blackmailed you?"

"My God," Mom cried, sitting back, putting both hands to her mouth. When we turned to look at her, her face was covered with tears. "She . . . he . . . Louisa and her father . . . they forced you and your brother . . . they

. . . my God? To do . . . to do . . . good?"

"Yes, my good lady." Joseph Suddard was close enough to put his hand on her arm. "Yes, so they did. Jim told us we would never find the bodies, or the maps, that they would be buried somewhere on his property."

Mom was still crying. "So Louisa, she couldn't let anyone touch . . . or move . . . her house."

Joseph Suddard nodded.

"She's going to be all right," Jake murmured. "Though I still don't understand. Maybe I'm a fool, but these were German sailors, they—"

"They were Nazis, sergeant, German Intelligence, I believe, and old Jim did report the submarine. He reported many submarines, most of which turned out to be cormorants." A vague smile. "Jim told us that we had to do exactly as he said or he'd turn us in. He didn't want to, you see. What would become of a wild and reckless eighteen-year-old found guilty of treason? Maybe I would have gotten juvenile hall, but William? No, Jim had a heart, a firm and stubborn heart. He used that money to pay our bills so we could finish high school, and then he sent us to college. Some he used himself, yes, to start his antiques business, but he never lived lavishly. We were to do

good, he said, to take this money that was meant for evil and do good with it."

"And the antiques? Marked with your names?"

"Well, I've no doubt that was William's doing, and that young Eddie MacDonald found him out. But Louisa did give us things, with orders to donate the proceeds to charity. As she herself did frequently, and as I hope she will do again."

At my mother's soft voice, we all turned to her. "You can force a man to do good . . ." She was drying her eyes. "But you cannot force a man to be good."

Joseph Suddard nodded again. "The location of the bodies and the maps were Jim's lit-

tle safeguard in case William ever tired of 'doing good.' It hasn't been easy for William, fighting his own nature every day." He smiled grimly. "Now let me show you where old Jim hid the buttons he cut off the men's clothing; they had swastikas on them. And their guns, their belts. You see that?" He turned to point in the dark toward the edge of the bluff. "The dog? I guessed long ago and checked one night when Louisa and Jim were out of town. The head comes off; it turns so the telescope could be turned. Inside the dog is hollow." He rose and touched my mother's hand. "Come, let me show you."

And so he did.

UNSOLVED

by
Robert Kesling

Unsolved at present, that is, but can you work it out?

The answer will appear in the February issue.

The Everyman Convenience Store was strictly a mom-'n'-pop operation, serving the needs of the quiet neighborhood. The owners, Mr. and Mrs. Jake Simpson, made a comfortable living, not much more.

Near closing time on January fifth Jake remarked to his wife, "Thank heaven for the holidays. Now that they're over, business has dropped off."

"Yes, it has," agreed Becky, pausing from sweeping the floor, "but it will pick up again—mark my words—as soon as our regular customers eat up all their Christmas and New Year's goodies."

They were interrupted by a pair of loud voices outside. "Got your gat?" asked one male voice.

"Cat?" replied the other. "We ain't got no cat."

"Gat! I said. You know, the weapon."

"Oh that. Sure, I got it right here. Coat pocket."

Jake and Becky rushed to the front window of their store and drew back the curtain, peering out onto the sidewalk where the street light shone clearly on two old men.

"Hey," whispered Jake, "I've seen them two before, right here in the store. A couple of old geezers from the Peaceful Rest Home."

"Yeah," said Becky, "I know the one with the cane; he used to be the salesman for our cereal and coffee supplier. And the taller one sometimes shops here with his wife Rosie. I wonder what they're up to."

They soon found out.

"Got your mask on?" asked the taller man.

"How's that?" said the other, the one with the cane.

"Mask! We gotta put on our masks."

"Oh."

Minutes later the two elderly masked men bumbled their way through the doorway. "This here's a stickup," declared one, waving a pistol.

"Look," said Jake Simpson, "why don't you two just go quietly back to the rest home and forget this nonsense."

"Tain't nonsense!" the man retorted. "Now, gimme the dough."

Becky spoke. "That pistol ain't even real. Let me have it." She strode forward.

The nervous oldster pulled the trigger, spraying a jet of water around his immediate vicinity.

Becky snatched the toy pistol and said sternly, "Now go on home or I'll tell your wives about this."

This taller would-be robber turned on his companion. "I told you it wouldn't work. Let's scram from the scene of the action."

Together the two hobbled out of the Everyman Convenience Store and disappeared in the direction of Peaceful Rest Home.

The following day Patrolman Sean Flanagan dropped in at the convenience store as usual, buying his midmorning Danish and inserting coins in the automatic coffee dispenser.

"Any trouble?" he inquired.

Becky Simpson laughed and related the events of the previous night. "Absolutely harmless," she declared.

"We didn't want to cause them old fellows any further embarrassment," added her husband, "so we didn't report it."

Flanagan frowned. "Sure, and it did no harm this time, but no tellin' what a couple of old guys with nothin' else to do will think up next. I'd better put a scare in them. Know their names?"

"No," answered Becky, "but it wouldn't be hard to find out. One used to be the salesman for one of our suppliers and the taller one trades here now and then with his wife Rosie."

"I'll speak to 'em," promised the patrolman.

That afternoon Sean Flanagan knocked at the door of Peaceful Rest Home. The white-uniformed matron admitted him, somewhat startled at the appearance of a patrolman.

"We've not reported any crime," she said.

"I'd just like to question the residents if I may."

"Oh, very well. But all seven couples are quite harmless, I assure you. Wait here in the reception room and I'll rouse them from their naps."

Twenty minutes dragged by as Flanagan leafed through back issues of the *Ladies' Home Journal*. At last the fourteen residents were assembled. Each wife had primped for the unexpected occasion. One wore a bright floral print dress.

"Some peculiar business has been takin' place hereabouts," began

Flanagan, opening his little notebook. "So I'd like your names and former professions, please."

The retirees leaned forward in anticipation of some rare excitement's entering their lives.

Their first names, one of the men volunteered, were Andrew, Bertram, Claude, Daniel, Elmer, Frank, and George, and their wives were Olivia, Paula, Quilla, Rosie, Sally, Teresa, and Vicky.

(1) Frank said, "It might be helpful, sir, to bear in mind that our last names have no connection whatever with our former professions. You see, Mr. Barber wasn't the barber, Mr. Carpenter wasn't the carpenter, Mr. Flowers wasn't the florist, Mr. Gardner wasn't the man who did professional gardening, Mr. Plummer wasn't the plumber, Mr. Teacher didn't teach school, and Mr. Sayles wasn't the salesman."

(2) Claude spoke: "Andrew, Bertram, and I include the husband of Quilla (who isn't the lady in the azure dress), Mr. Flowers, and the husband of the woman in the blue dress."

(3) Daniel was next. "Paula's husband, the man (who isn't the gardener) whose wife is wearing the azure dress, and I are Mr. Plummer, Mr. Teacher, and Mr. Carpenter. Neither Elmer nor I ever did any plumbing."

(4) George declared, "Neither Mr. Gardener nor I is married to the lady in the azure dress. Mr. Sayles, the former plumber (who isn't Claude), and I are married to Olivia, Quilla, and Sally."

(5) Elmer said, "I am not Paula's husband. Mr. Plummer, the retired teacher (who's not Teresa's husband), and I are married to yonder ladies in the yellow, green, and coral dresses."

(6) Andrew stated, "Mr. Barber, the former salesman, the retired gardener, and I are not married to Olivia or the ladies in the coral or yellow dresses."

(7) Bertram said, "Mr. Gardner, the retired florist, and I are not married to Rosie or Teresa, nor to the ladies wearing the red or green dresses."

(8) Vicky stepped forward. "I'm not Mrs. Carpenter. Mrs. Teacher, the lady in blue, and I are wives of the retired florist, salesman, and gardener."

"Okay," said Flanagan, closing his notebook and returning his pencil to his shirt pocket. "I'd like to speak to _____ and _____ privately."

The other retirees departed apprehensively.

"Now, you two," the patrolman said to the two nervous old men, "where'd you get the idea you could pull a stickup?"

"Well," the taller man admitted reluctantly, "we were watching and old rerun on television, something about an *Over-the-Hill Gang*, and—well—it seemed like a lot of excitement."

The one with the cane said sheepishly, "We woulda given any money back. It was just something to do."

"Well, don't *ever* try a fool stunt like that again," warned the patrolman. "I'll be keepin' an eye on both of you."

"Please, officer," pleaded the taller man, "please don't tell my wife."

"*Life?*" said the shorter man, tapping his cane nervously. "Well, I suppose we deserve it."

"No, _____," said his companion in crime, "I said *wife*—don't tell my *wife*. I'll explain it all later."

"Oh."

Who were the elderly would-be holdup pair? Who were their unsuspecting wives?

See page 123 for the solution to the December puzzle.

FICTION

FAVORITE UNCLE

William T. Lowe

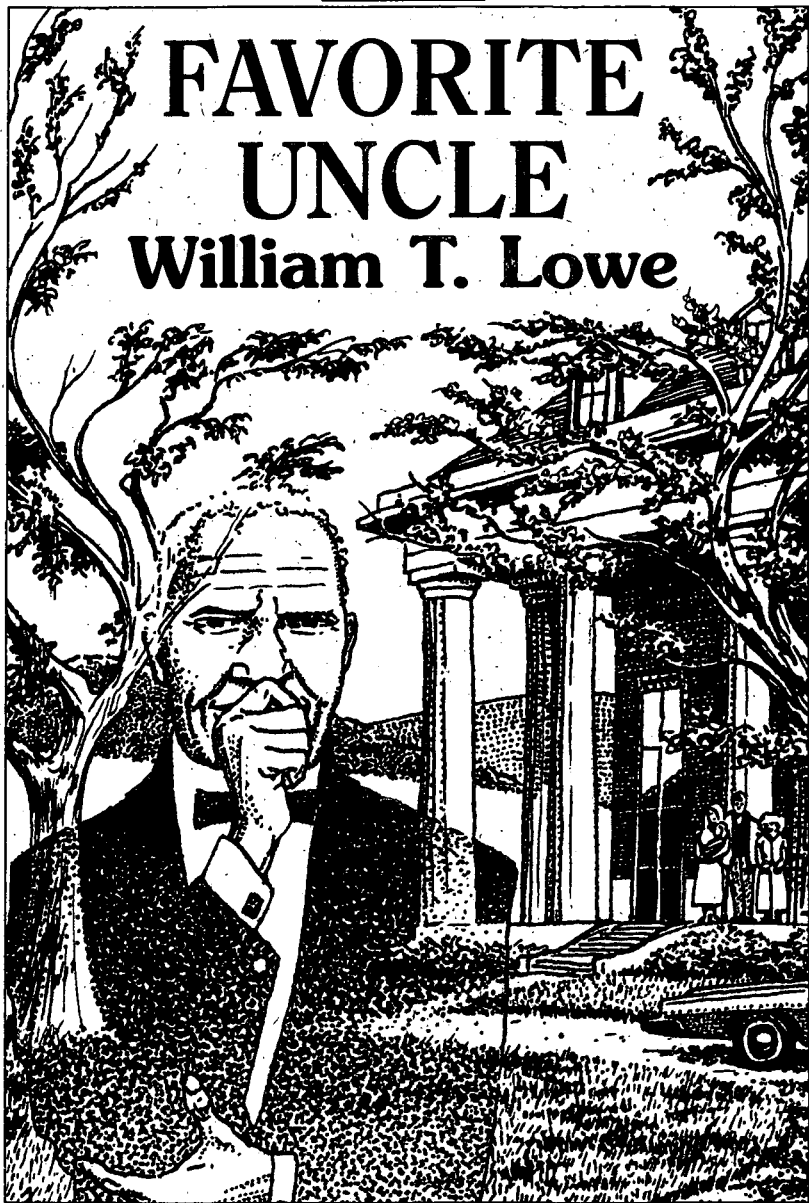


Illustration by Jason C. Eckhardt

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 1197

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It was my fault the silver tea service was stolen. Usually a house with a ghost in it can't be robbed, but that night the baby was crying and I was upstairs in the nursery. Still, I should have known a stranger had crept in downstairs; I've blamed myself ever since.

In the morning Martha from the kitchen noticed the service was missing, and she told Miss Polly. Then Mister Jim called Sheriff Culpepper.

The sheriff came out to the Hall right away. I remember him when he was a boy raiding our apple orchard—today he is portly and balding. Miss Polly gave him a description; the pieces were solid silver, and the set was a Pollard family heirloom.

"The thief got in through a window in the pantry," Mister Jim said.

Sheriff Culpepper nodded. "Lots of strangers around these days. Some of the farmers have hired extra help to get their crops in."

To Miss Polly he said, "Now don't you worry none, Miss Polly. Me and my boys will do everything we can."

"Thank you, sheriff." She was very close to tears. "That set belonged to my great-grandfather."

There was no way I could tell her how sorry I was that it had been stolen. I was in service here at Mimosa Hall for forty years, and nothing like this had ever happened, before or after I died.

Mister Jim showed the sheriff to the door and came back and put his arms around Miss Polly. "Don't worry, honey."

They have been married over a year now, and their firstborn is a beautiful baby boy, James Andrew Howell, Junior.

Mister Jim left to go out to the fields, and Miss Polly walked down the hall to the family parlor. I followed her because that's where we have our private conversations. She knows I'm a ghost and that I belong here. Her mother explained it to her some years ago.

On the mantel above the fireplace are two candlesticks. To say yes I tilt the right one; to say no I move the one on the left. Both candlesticks leaning toward each other means maybe. The system has its limits, but in my day house servants were not expected to read and write.

Miss Polly had been looking pale and drawn lately. Her blonde hair seemed lifeless, and there were dark circles under her eyes. The theft didn't help matters. But still she looked up at the mantel and said, "Don't blame yourself, Jonathan. It wasn't your fault."

Just like her mother. Always considerate of other people. I wished the candlesticks could say thank you.



She changed the subject. "Jonathan, Jim's mother is coming to stay with us for a while. She's been dying to help with the baby."

I had heard them discussing the visit. Miss Polly felt she didn't need any help, but she couldn't refuse her mother-in-law.

"We'll put Mother Howell in the big west room." She turned to go. "Do be careful while she's here, Jonathan."

I knew what she meant. A few times I've forgotten myself and opened a door for somebody, or made a fire start or a lamp light. I know people are frightened when they see things like that, but old habits are hard to break.

Mrs. Sarah Howell, Mister Jim's mother, was frail and stooped, and her hands were knotted by arthritis. She had to walk with a cane, but she was bright-eyed and alert and she was determined to take charge of the baby's care. That's where our paths crossed.

Like most young mothers Miss Polly had tried to do everything herself, and she had worn herself out. One day when the baby needed changing Miss Polly^a was having a nap, so I changed him. And I kept on helping with him. Miss Polly didn't mind; she may have remembered that years ago I helped her mother the same way with Miss Polly's little brother.

I managed to stay out of Mother Howell's way until one day, when I thought she was out in the garden, she walked in and saw a basket of freshly laundered towels folding themselves and stacking themselves on a shelf. She gasped, turned pale, and almost dropped her cane.

"Polly!" she whispered. Then, in a louder voice, "Polly!"

She hobbled over to the baby's crib and stood there, glaring around the room and waving her cane.

"Polly!"

Miss Polly hurried in. "What is it?"

Her fingers shaking, Mother Howell pointed at the basket. "Something was moving those towels."

Of course Miss Polly guessed what had happened. "Darn it, Jonathan," she said under her breath. She put her arm around the old lady. "Yes, dear, I know."

"You know?"

"Yes, dear. Let's sit down." She led Mother Howell to a sofa. In her calmest, sweetest voice Miss Polly said, "Dear, you've just met Jonathan."

"I have? I didn't see anybody."

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"Yes, Mother Howell, Jonathan is a member of the family, but you can't see him."

The old lady stared around the room and looked back at Miss Polly. "Is he a . . ."

Miss Polly nodded and smiled reassuringly.

"Does my son know about him?"

"Yes, dear."

"And he won't hurt the baby?"

Miss Polly smiled sweetly. "Goodness no, dear. Jonathan is a sort of uncle, a favorite uncle. We trust him, and I'm sure you'll get to like him, too."

Mother Howell folded her hands on top of her cane. Her face was still white, but there was a determined set to her mouth. "Well, if you say so, daughter. I reckon I can try."

From then on we did work together. Mother Howell's cane and stiff joints meant she was slow on the stairs, so I took care of the laundry and made sure the bath water was heated just right. That gave Mother Howell more time to spend with little James. She rocked him and sang to him, which was an ability I no longer had.

Sarah Howell loved her little grandson, but she felt out of place at the Hall. It was too big and too formal. She was uncomfortable with the paneled walls, high ceilings, and oil paintings. We don't have much of a staff now and nobody in uniform answers the front door, but the Hall is still the grandest house this side of Richmond.

And Miss Polly didn't care for Mother Howell's use of the language. "She talks like a fieldhand," I heard her say to herself. But both ladies did their best to get along as all families are supposed to do.

A few days after the robbery Sheriff Culpepper came by to give Miss Polly a progress report. "Pleased to meet you, ma'am," he said to Mother Howell, and let himself be persuaded to sample Martha's famous peach turnovers.

"That scoundrel robbed Mr. Charles Raymond's house last Sunday and Ralph Benway's place Tuesday night. But don't you worry, Miss Polly, I think me and my boys are gainin' on him. Just be sure to keep your doors and windows shut at night in case he decides to come back here. Why, thankee, I believe I will have another helping . . ."

After the sheriff left, Miss Polly went up to the nursery and left Mother Howell alone in the parlor. She was frowning and tapping

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her chin with the handle of her cane, a sign that she was thinking about something.

So was I. More burglaries in the area meant the thief or thieves were still here. That meant Miss Polly's tea service might be hidden nearby. And since the Hall was the biggest house in the district, the thief might think it worth a second visit.

Mother Howell hobbled to the center of the room and peered up at the ceiling. "Uncle Jonathan, are you here?"

She didn't know about our candlestick system, but she was family. I made the right candlestick turn around slowly. She wagged her head. "If that don't beat all," she whispered. Then she said, "Jonathan, we ought to set us a trap and see if we can catch that varmint."

I had been thinking the same thing. The candlestick turned a cartwheel to show how I agreed.

In the pantry was a large glass-fronted cabinet that held dinner plates. I moved it closer to the window so it could be seen from outside and put a table with a lamp near it. Mother Howell took out some of the china and arranged her "bait."

"Why are you putting those silver things in the china cabinet?" Miss Polly asked her.

"Never you mind, daughter. I'm just cleaning them."

Her plan was simple. "If the thief shows his face, you come and wake me up, and I'll have Jimmy call the sheriff."

My plan was different. At the risk of her being furious with me I was going to let the thief go.

Two nights later the window in the pantry, left unlocked, slid open, and a man climbed through. The lamp on the table was burning, its soft light gleaming on an array of silver pieces in the cabinet, vases and table silver. Another shelf held a tempting assortment of jewelry, necklaces and brooches and dinner rings. On a piece of blue velvet a small heap of gold coins glittered in the lamp-light.

The man stood before the cabinet and stared at the treasures inside. The door was not locked, only closed with a simple catch. The thief took a cloth bag from a pocket and shook it open, ready to be filled with loot.

He reached out and tugged on the handle of the door. It wouldn't open. He tried harder. I could have kept the door closed until he got tired or tried to break the glass, but I had something else in mind.



I opened the door to the kitchen, and Skeeter came bounding out, barking and growling. He is Mister Jim's hound; he sleeps in the kitchen. Actually Skeeter was barking at me—dogs and cats are afraid of ghosts—but the thief didn't know that.

The pantry was small and the dog big and loud. The thief dived out the window and disappeared into the night.

I lured Skeeter back into the kitchen with a bone in front of his nose, put out the lamp, and closed the window before I left. Mother Howell would be mad if she knew a burglar had been here and I let him get away. But I wanted to see where he had hidden all the things he had stolen. Following people is easy for me.

I thought the man was greedy enough to come back again, and he was. Two nights later he appeared at the window when the house was quiet and dark. He had a chunk of meat for the dog and a pry bar for the sticking cabinet door.

He eased himself through the window and stood listening. I let him take a step toward the cabinet before he tripped and fell. I made sure his head struck the corner of the table; sprawled on the floor, he had no further interest in anything around him.

Mother Howell was to have a hand in capturing the thief—it would be easier to explain as her idea. I drew her downstairs by making her hear the baby crying. She came in the dining room door, leaning on her cane and blinking in the dim light.

"Is the baby here? I thought I heard the baby . . ."

The room became darker, and the floor seemed to tilt under her feet. A chair glided up, and she grabbed it for support. Feeling tired, she sat down and closed her eyes to rest.

After a moment the room brightened, and Mother Howell looked up. Across the room by the pantry door she saw a man on the floor, bound and gagged, her cane lying next to him. On her lap were some cords from the kitchen, the kind we use to hang meats in the smokehouse.

She opened her mouth to call out, but just then Miss Polly and Mister Jim rushed into the room. They stood stock-still, looking at Mother Howell sitting in her chair with a strange man tied up on the floor. Then they ran over and wrapped their arms around her.

"Mother Howell, are you all right?"

"Mother, you've caught a burglar!"

"She looks faint. Jim, fetch the smelling salts."



Mister Jim, inspecting the prisoner, saw that he was bound securely. "Smelling salts? What Mother needs is a good toddy."

Very soon Mother Howell was sipping from a large glass of bourbon and milk and sugar. She watched as Mister Jim dragged the man to a closet and locked him in.

"Mother, I'm proud of you! You caught him red-handed, did you?"

"Just relax, Mother Howell, it's all over now."

"I'm all right, daughter, don't fuss."

"Here's your cane, Mother. We certainly feel safe with you in the house!"

The old lady had taken several sips from her toddy, and there was color in her cheeks. All the attention and the liquor were going to her head.

"Son, call your sheriff and tell him I done caught me a polecat!"

At that moment Sheriff Culpepper and one of his deputies were walking up to the front door. He knocked, and Mister Jim went to let him in. The sheriff was carrying a big sack and was brimming with news.

"I've got a surprise for you and the missus, son!" he crowed.

"We've got a surprise for you, too," Mister Jim said, but the sheriff wasn't listening. He left his deputy at the door and hurried down the hall. In the dining room he rushed over to where Miss Polly sat beside Mother Howell and swept off his hat.

"My apologies, ladies, for callin' at such a late hour, but I did see a light on."

He placed the sack at Miss Polly's feet. "There you are, Miss Polly. All your silver things, the big tray, the sugarbowl, the teapot, the creamer, all of it!"

Miss Polly was surprised and very grateful. She thanked him over and over. The sheriff beamed.

"Twarn't nothin', Miss Polly."

"But how in the world did you find them?"

"That's a funny thing," the sheriff said. "My deputy Colin always goes home for lunch, even though he lives way out there on Cold Spring Road. Well, today he was passin' by the Douglas place when he heard a cowbell."

"Colin thought one of them prize Douglas Holsteins had done got lost and he'd better try to catch her. He followed the sound of that cowbell a good piece back in the brush, and it led him to this old lean-to."

"He went inside, and there under some blankets he found your

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things and some stuff from other houses around here. The scoundrel who was doin' all the thievin' had hid 'em right there. So Colin brung it all back into town.

"Funny thing about it was, he never did set eyes on that lost cow. But there was this cowbell settin' on top of the lean-to, and the bell had a little red ribbon tied on it. Colin says it was the darnest thing he ever did see."

Mister Jim had grown impatient. "We're obliged to you, sheriff, but now here's our surprise for you!" He led him to the closet and showed him the thief, now shaking his head and looking around fearfully.

The sheriff was speechless. "What in tarnation happened, Mr. Howell?"

Mister Jim was grinning from ear to ear. "I didn't exactly see it, sheriff, but it's easy enough to tell what happened. My mother came downstairs for something and found this man about to make off with some more of our things. She sneaked up and caught him a good clout on the head with her cane. When I got downstairs, she had him all tied up and ready for you."

He put his arm around Mother Howell again. "I'm mighty proud of her, I can tell you."

The sheriff made a little bow. "Mighty fine work, Mrs. Howell, mighty fine."

"Thankee, sheriff, thankee." She held out her glass. "Reckon I could have a bit more of this toddy?"

The sheriff stared at the deformed fingers and knuckles of the hand holding the glass, and of the other hand clutching her cane. I knew what he was thinking: with her crippled hands Mother Howell could have never managed the knots that bound the prisoner, nor done the work of trussing him up.

It had been a chance I had to take; I had hoped the sheriff wouldn't question Mister Jim's story. But now he might ask questions about what actually happened. If he did, it would confuse Mother Howell, and it would embarrass Miss Polly and Mister Jim. They knew perfectly well what had really happened—they know I sometimes take liberties with my position—but they don't want anyone else to know.

There was a frown on his face as the sheriff spoke to the old lady. "Mrs. Howell, I was just wonderin' . . ."

Mister Jim guessed what was on the sheriff's mind. He took him by the arm as if they were old friends.



"Well now, sheriff," he said, "you've got your man, and there'll be no more trouble." He turned the sheriff toward the door. "Why not let your deputy take your prisoner on to the station and you and I have a little libation in my office, just to celebrate?"

Sheriff Culpepper considered the offer. The Hall has a reputation for serving prime liquor. Now that the thief had been caught, there was really no need for trivial questions. And he had never been known to refuse a glass.

"Don't mind if I do," he said.

Mister Jim led him into the hall, talking confidentially. "I've got a special bottle a friend sent me from over in Tennessee, and I'd like your opinion . . ."

At the door the sheriff turned back. "Congratulations again, ma'am," he said to Mother Howell. "You done a fine job of catchin' that fellow."

She drew herself up proudly and thumped her cane on the floor. "Thankee, sheriff. Nobody better come messin' around this house, I tell you!"

When they had the room to themselves, the old lady leaned toward Miss Polly, an anguished look on her face. "Daughter," she said carefully, "I been drinkin' and I know it addles me, but I know I never hit that man like Jim says I did. With this misery in my hands I just couldn't. I did hear the baby cryin' and I came downstairs, and this room was dark and there was some scufflin', and then you and Jimmy came in."

She hiccupped and put her hand over her mouth politely. "Jim and the sheriff want to make me out a hero, but I'm not, and that's the truth."

Miss Polly patted her on the shoulder. "Don't worry about it," she said, considerate as always. "You were mighty brave, and everything's fine now. Best you go on upstairs and go back to bed."

The old lady shook her head stubbornly. "But, daughter, I want you to know the straight of it. Uncle Jonathan and I been settin' a trap. That's why I moved some of your pretties."

Miss Polly was astonished. "You and Jonathan?"

"It's the truth. The way it worked out, it was more his doin' than mine. It's Jonathan ought to get the credit." She leaned toward Miss Polly. "No need for you to tell Jimmy."

Miss Polly smiled at her and put her arm around her. "It'll be our secret, Sarah, just the three of us."



The lady nodded and peered up at the ceiling. "Thankee, Jonathan," she said.

She turned back to Miss Polly. "And thank you, daughter. It feels good to have someone call me by my given name."

Miss Polly embraced her and kissed her on the cheek. "We're family, aren't we, Sarah? And this is your home."

With a beaming smile on her face Mother Howell went off to bed.

Miss Polly picked up the silver pieces and went to the big sideboard. With loving care she inspected each piece for damage and placed it in position. I had already promised myself they would get a good polishing tomorrow.

Standing there alone in the big room Miss Polly began to laugh. It was the first time I'd seen her laugh out loud in a very long time. She laughed until she had to lean against the sideboard.

"That man followed a cowbell through the woods? A cowbell with a red ribbon on it? I'd have loved to have seen his face when he found it! I wonder how it got there . . ."

She laughed again and went upstairs. I knew how that bell got there, and I think she knew, too.

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## SOLUTION TO THE DECEMBER "UNSOLVED":

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The hypnotizing thief was using the name "Bart Noonan," and performed his magic act with attractive "Ellen Wilson" as his assistant. They came from Gary.

| DAY       | MAN           | WOMAN         | CITY         | ACT       |
|-----------|---------------|---------------|--------------|-----------|
| Monday    | Claude Orson  | Dotty Ulman   | Kankakee     | ballet    |
| Tuesday   | Frank Moore   | Clara Vanpohl | Indianapolis | tap       |
| Wednesday | Andrew Queen  | Flora Xander  | Huntington   | comedy    |
| Thursday  | Donald Rowley | Alice Tritt   | Laporte      | vocalists |
| Friday    | Bart Noonan   | Ellen Wilson  | Gary         | magic     |
| Saturday  | Edward Peters | Becky Smith   | Jackson      | piano     |

FICTION

# A Man of Principle

Geoffrey Hitchcock

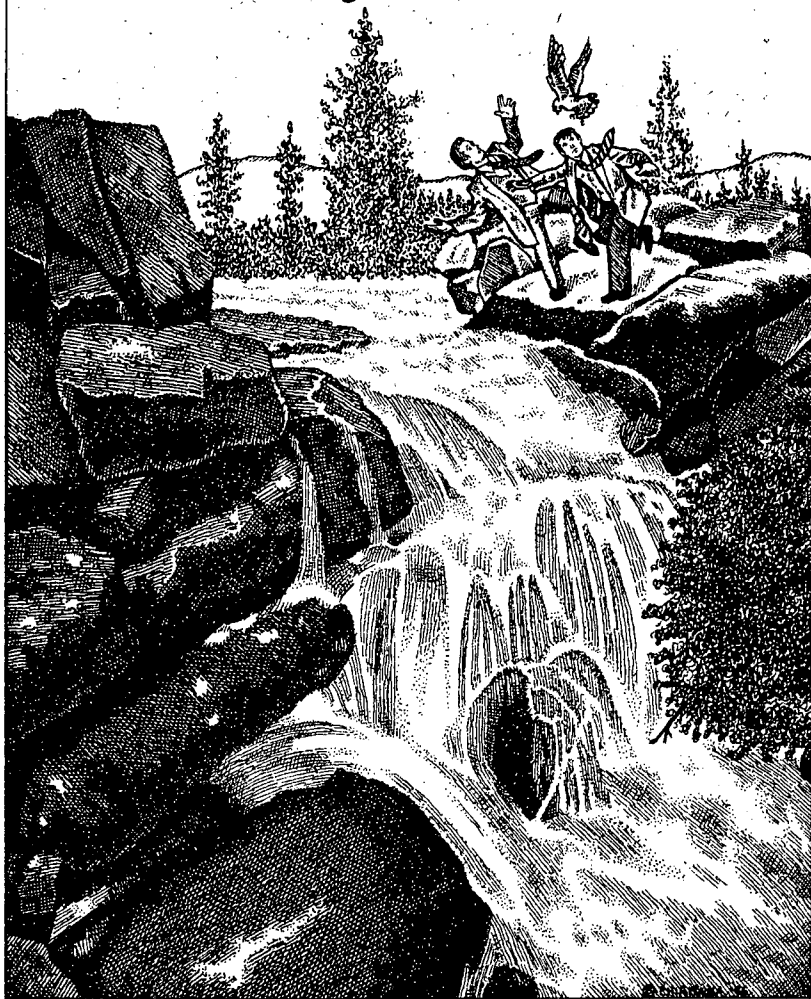


Illustration by Ron Chironna

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 1/97

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## TWO MEN IN CONFLICT

Steve Pritchard phoned his wife and told her he was going for a walk—probably along the river track towards the falls—but she knew him, it could be anywhere, he didn't always notice where he was going when he was deep in thought. He thought best when he was walking. Vera said okay, just don't be too late. He set off long-striding the footpath by the highway, intending to turn off onto the track a mile or so on. Tomorrow was the council meeting, and as chairman of the planning committee he would have to recommend or not recommend the proposal by Justin Borways for development at the falls.

As an ardent conservationist he was naturally dead against the scheme; anything upsetting the natural order of things upset him and this scheme above all. But he knew there were many on the council who would be in favor—the shopkeepers, who were in the majority, and the tourism promoters.

He would have to rally the retailers. They might see it as a threat to their businesses. Maybe it wasn't such a bad scheme—but Justin Borways! Wasn't he the developer who'd done so much damage to forests in Brazil and Borneo and the Solomons? We certainly don't want

the likes of him getting a toe-hold in New Zealand!

A car drew up quietly beside him, a big maroon Mercedes.

"Going my way?" a pleasant voice with an American accent addressed him.

"Mr. Borways, isn't it? No, thanks, I'm out for a walk as you see."

"I've heard you are a great walker and tramper, Mr. Pritchard. I was wondering if you could spare me, say, half an hour? I'm on my way to the falls, and I'd take it very kindly if you would come with me so I can explain my plan to you and you can show me where I've gone wrong."

Steve climbed in. What else could he do? It was a perfectly reasonable request, and the man was polite.

"It could be a good idea, though I doubt we'll see eye to eye."

"I doubt it, too. You are a man of very fixed ideas."

"I have my principles."

"Haven't we all?" said Justin Borways. They drove on in silence, Steve refraining from making all the retorts that occurred to him, confining his remarks to the pleasantness of the weather.

At the falls Justin Borways lost no time in showing Steve where he intended to build the bridge. It would be a single-lane

bridge, gracefully arched with tastefully designed wrought-iron handrails. He showed Steve a sketch of it, but Steve hardly looked. In his mind's eye he saw only a standard Roads Department two-lane concrete box girder bridge.

Then Justin tried to explain the hotel he had had his architects plan. The road would turn left across the bridge—yes, there would be a small amount of excavation needed, but then it would arrive at the natural plateau. Not very wide but long enough for a long Tudor style building just two stories high. There would be dining rooms and lounges on the lower floor and bedrooms on the upper. There would be balconies with flowers where the overnights could take their ease and have their tea. Farther along there would be half a dozen chalets, each with a tended garden. And more gardens along the cliff edge with seats for the falls' viewers.

Again Justin produced some rough sketches, and again Steve's anti-Borways brain saw instead an ugly, square, concrete monstrosity at least six stories high.

It was nonsense and deep down inside he knew it, but his prejudice against Borways and his ilk was too heavy for him to shift. He paced about with

hands locked behind his back while the developer waited patiently for him to speak.

Borways hated these greenies; they were a real pain in the butt. If he organized a forestry company, turned some trees into useful timber, and at the same time brought a measure of prosperity to the poverty-stricken locals, they were there accusing him of vandalism. What was a tree good for, for chrissake, if it wasn't for timber? Trees grew again, didn't they? What was this dolt going to come up with now? How could he possibly find any valid objection to this scheme?

"Mr. Borways," Steve turned to face his adversary, "your scheme has its merits, without doubt. I'm sure you're going to give me a spiel about making the falls available to the aged and incapacitated, and to point out at great length all the financial advantages it will bring to our small community, especially how it will help to solve the unemployment problem, but

"But?"

"But don't you think these falls have already had all the 'improvement' they can stand? An access road has been built from the highway, a large carpark has been built. So many tourists come this way now that we have had to build



toilets and Mr. Whippy parks his ice cream van here. Instead of a beautiful, tranquil spot in the middle of the mad world it has been turned into a . . . a zoo!"

Justin chuckled to himself. "I take it you don't approve of zoos. No, they would go against your principles. But I happen to be somewhat of an authority on zoos. I had so much pleasure from a certain zoo when I was a small boy that I have made a point of visiting as many as I've been able to, and I can tell you that there are some superlative zoos in the world, just as there are some pretty scruffy ones. Some of these I have been able to improve.

"Now, I like your metaphor of this place's being a zoo, and I say it's a rather scruffy one. My plan would lift it into the higher bracket. At the risk of offending your sensibilities, I would like to point out one or two things that your obsession for leaving things alone may have obscured from you.

"In the first place, there's the setting. This bank is pleasant enough—there are some trees about, even if most of them are pines—but the other bank, if not actually ugly, is nothing but a scrubby hillside that my build-ings, gardens, and a plantation of native trees behind them would greatly improve. Then

there's the waterfall itself—it's not the greatest fall in the world, now is it?"

"It's different," Steve rallied to its defense.

"Yes, and that's its attraction, though some people might consider it a cataract rather than a fall. But a cataract is a lot of water tumbling over a lot of rocks on the way down to a lower level—lots of bubbling white water. Here we have a smooth, not terribly steep channel that the water glides through before it tips over into a deep pool, a drop of not much more than twenty feet. But what makes it special is the huge quantity of sparkling clear water that goes over."

"What makes it special," said Steve, "are the colors. All the shades of green and white weaving about in fascinating swirling patterns. I can watch it for hours."

"So you can understand why I want to make this unique place available to others."

"But that's *not* the reason, is it, Mr. Borways? The real reason you want to go ahead with your scheme is to make a few more million dollars to add to your already overflowing bank balance."

Justin snorted in disgust and stalked off to stand on a flat rock on the riverbank where the water flowed swiftly by, making no sound that could be heard above

the dull roar of the falls. He watched it hurrying along not two feet below him for a full minute, then turned and faced Steve, who had moved up behind him.

"Really, Pritchard, I didn't think you could be so naive. Surely you know that without profit there is no progress. Because you don't wish my company to make a return for all the work and capital investment it puts into this project, you will deprive your district of a probable thirty or forty million dollar cash inflow and satisfactory livelihoods for the hotel workers and the people who find employment in other sections of the town.

"That seems to me to be crass selfishness. Is it that you don't see anything in it for you? Is that the problem? Are you holding out in the hope that I'll offer you shares in the company in return for your cooperation? Yes, I believe it is. You said you were a man of principle, but I know only too well that every man of principle has his price. What's yours, Pritchard? Fifty thousand? A hundred? Shall we say half a million dollars when you've talked your committee into passing the plans and another when work starts?"

Steve couldn't believe his ears, and for a moment he was too

shocked to speak. "Mr. Borways, you've offered me a bribe."

"Think about it. You can't do much with a million dollars, but you could buy your wife a new car and some nice clothes and maybe save a whale or two. But of course if you do decide to ride your high horse and go crying bribe to the council, I shall simply deny it. My word against yours. Nobody heard me. There's nobody else here."

"And if I did that, you would no doubt get a cunning lawyer to bring a slander charge against me."

"No doubt at all."

"On the other hand, if you fell in the river there might be some doubt as to whether you fell or were pushed. My word against . . . ?" Justin Borways didn't have time to be scared. Steve Pritchard didn't have time to ask himself if he could really do it. A bird, a kereru, the big native pigeon, flew out of a tree right over their heads with a great whirr of wings. Startled, both men instinctively stepped back . . .

### STEVEN PRITCHARD

The next minute was the worst in Steve's life. He flung himself flat onto the rock with his arms hanging over the edge.

"Swim! Swim, you silly bugger, swim to me and grab my hand!"

But Borways was thrashing the water in a hopeless manner. He even seemed to be swimming the wrong way, away from the shore while the current carried him ever more swiftly towards the falls. He had his back to Steve, and if he was calling for help, Steve could never have heard him above the noise of the falls, yet in his imagination he could hear him crying out, calling, "Two million, three million!"

There was nothing he could do—he had no rope, not even a long branch to offer. The only thing he could do was to jump in and try to swim for both of them, which would have meant two of them going over the falls to their certain death.

Instead he sprang up and raced to the lookout platform just past the falls. He didn't see his enemy go over and was amazed to see him surface briefly in the pool. An arm shot out of the water—a hand displaying two fingers. Then it was gone, sucked into the roaring whirlpool. Had he called out? There was too much noise to hear. What was the significance of the two fingers? Was he making a final offer of two million? Or perhaps seven? His money wouldn't save him now, poor sod.

Steve leaned on the guardrail. He felt sick. He suddenly noticed he was trembling and sat down on a nearby bench. Soon the shock of seeing a man die began to leave him, and a feeling almost of elation began to take its place. Justin Borways, enemy of the planet Earth, was no more. The planet had taken its revenge for all the destruction he had been responsible for and all the desecration he was planning. Steve offered up a little prayer of thanks. Then a thought struck him. He mustn't just sit there in a state of shock. He must report it to the police right away.

He was half standing when he had another thought. Would they believe him when he told them what had happened, or would they believe that he had pushed Justin in? It was known that there was no love lost between the two. Of course they couldn't prove it, but no doubt Justin's wife would hire a crooked lawyer who could persuade a jury that he, Steven, was guilty of murder.

It was a sticky situation to be in, but it couldn't be helped. He shrugged the problem away. No good worrying about it now. He must simply report it to the police as soon as he could and let matters sort themselves out.

He went across to the carpark. There was only one car in it, the

big maroon Mercedes. He tried all the doors—locked, of course. It would be natural for Borways to keep his possessions safe, so he would lock the car even though he was hardly going to be out of sight of it.

No, Steve told himself, that's not fair. Don't get paranoid about the man. The car was locked as it should be, and now the keys were in the river somewhere below the falls. How did one break into a car? It was supposed to be easy, and he had managed to open the door of his own cheap car once when he had locked the keys in it, but this one was another matter. The doors were sure to need some electronic gadget to open them, and then there was still the problem of having no key to start it with. Better to walk to the highway and try to flag down a car or truck.

The sun set during his ten minute walk. It was dusk, the time of day when drivers switched on their lights more to be seen than to see. Quite soon lights appeared over a rise, and he was preparing to step out into the road to try for a lift when something else occurred to him and he stepped behind a bush instead. Nobody knew he had gone out there with Borways, so wouldn't it be simpler to pretend he hadn't been there? It would save everybody a lot of trouble if

it was assumed that Justin had accidentally fallen in—as indeed he had. It seemed a better option. But he mustn't be seen on the road out here or awkward questions would be asked. There might not always be a convenient bush to dodge behind whenever a car came along. Already another vehicle was approaching.

Steve stayed behind the bush until the car had swept past and then went back to the falls. He would walk back to town along the river track until it joined the highway only two kilometers from home. It would take at least three hours and he would cop it from Vera when he got in, but that couldn't be helped. She was fairly used to his coming home late for one reason or another. He would say he had started out on a walk so he could think about the Borways project and had found himself miles from home with no phone handy. He should be home soon after nine.

It was nearly six when he turned into the river track and already almost dark. A nuisance, he thought, but a half moon was riding high and he knew the track inside out. He made fair progress for a while until he tripped over a tree root and came down heavily. Nothing broken or sprained, thank goodness. Just a bruised big toe.

His office shoes weren't all that good for this sort of track. He would have to slow down before he had a real accident.

The track went on its winding way. The moonlight dappled the path with shadow so that it was hard to see what were shadows and what obstructions. He moved more warily now, knowing that a sprained ankle would mean the end of everything. He would be found in the morning with no possible explanation for his being there except, of course, the truth. Which nobody would believe.

His progress was slower but steady. I won't be home before ten, he thought. Let's hope Vera doesn't panic and start phoning around. Oh well, if she did, his story about going too far would still be good, and being caught by the dark would help explain his long absence. He had better start to think about where he was going to tell them he had been. They mustn't know he had been anywhere near the river. Not that part of the river anyway.

It wasn't easy. It had to be somewhere he could have walked without being seen—somewhere he could have strayed where he was unable to find a phone when he did wake up to the fact that he had strayed too far. He couldn't focus his mind on a plausible

spot—it kept slipping back to the falls, to Borways falling into the river. To Borways and his scheme.

And then the light went out. A cloud passed across the moon, and Steve Pritchard was in complete darkness.

Damn! He couldn't see a thing. He must sit down and wait for his eyes to get accustomed to this new darkness. He scrabbled around and found a tree trunk to rest his back against. But the darkness was complete. The cloud must be a thick one, not letting even the smallest starlight through. After a while he realized it was hopeless—he would just have to feel his way. He got up and with his hands stretched out before him shuffled gingerly along the track. It was painfully slow, but it was progress. He struggled on, not thinking about the time it was taking.

His leading foot stepped onto nothing. Instinctively he swung his body to the right and grabbed hold of a branch, his heart pounding wildly. He stayed frozen for perhaps a minute until he could get a grip on himself, then he took a careful pace backwards and sank down on the ground. It had been a shock, but at least he knew where he was. The track took a sudden left turn at the top of a rise, and if he'd gone straight on,

he would have fallen maybe forty feet, not vertically but steeply enough to have done himself some serious damage. He felt sure he knew the spot, but dammit, it was only about a quarter of the way along. He pressed the little knob on his watch that faintly illuminated the dial. It was bright against the darkness. Nine fifty-seven! Nearly ten o'clock and only a quarter of the way along the track. And then still miles from home.

Steve's cup of misery was full indeed. He simply sat and wept for at least ten minutes. Then he wiped his eyes and tried to get things into perspective. In the first place, he must work out just why he was here in this impossible predicament. He was here because Justin Borways had taken him out to the falls to put a perfectly reasonable proposition to him. To explain his project and point out the advantages he saw in it. But Steve hated Justin, perhaps not the man himself but what he stood for, which was greed and the squandering of the planet's resources. In other words he, Steven Pritchard, hated developers. He wanted the world to stay in its natural state. Now he asked himself, was that reasonable? Would he really like to live in a cave, hunt animals with stone-tipped spears, and dress

himself in their skins? No, that was going too far, there had to be *some* development.

He thought of all the beautiful old castles and cathedrals he had seen in Europe, and he thought of all the hideous concrete tenements and office blocks, put up quickly without much thought apart from what they would bring the developers. The cathedrals on the other hand had taken hundreds of years to build with thought only of their ultimate beauty.

Before he could comfort himself further with this line of reasoning, rain started to pour down. He was already tired, cold, and hungry; now he was going to be wet to finish the picture.

A fortuitous flash of lightning showed him a sizable tree close by that would give him some shelter. He crawled over to it and leaned against its trunk. What was he to do now? As an experienced trumper he knew what he had to do. He snuggled up to the tree as best he could and prepared to wait out the night. He felt in his pockets, hopeful of finding a barley sugar, but he was wearing his light office jacket, not the good old parka he always wore when out tramping, and there was nothing in its pockets to bring him comfort. At least they could offer some warmth for his hands.

He put his hands in them, pulled the jacket closely round him, drew up his knees, and tried to sleep.

Sleep didn't come easily. He tried to make his mind a blank, but thoughts of Borways going over the falls kept haunting him. He concentrated on thinking about where he should tell the authorities he had been should they ever come questioning him. But no matter where his thoughts roamed, he could think of nowhere he could have gone where he would be forced to spend the night out. Except . . . of course! It was literally right under his nose. He would just have to change his story a bit. He had been worrying about the falls project and had set off walking after he left the office, as he was one of those people who thought better on their feet. He hadn't paid any attention to where he was going and had found himself walking along the highway. He came to the turning into the river track and was halfway along it before he realized it was getting dark. He was past the point of no return on the track, so he thought it best to continue on to the falls and try for a lift home from there. But he hadn't counted on the complete darkness and then the rain. He had been forced to take cover under a tree and wait for light.

It was perfect. Nobody knew he had gone out with Justin, of that he was quite sure. And his wife would testify that it was in his character to do just such a thing. It wasn't the first time by any means that he had taken off like that without thinking about where he was going. Perfect. And unbreakable if anybody should want to break it. Who would want to? Mrs. Borways, if there was one? She would be much better off without Borways. He was a philanderer. Pleased with himself, he stretched his legs out and managed to drift into a fitful sleep.

He woke stiff, cramped, and deadly cold. He struggled to his feet and stamped them and beat his arms across his chest in the time-honored manner. He didn't dare walk up and down for fear of losing his footing and falling into the mud, which no doubt was everywhere by now. It was still black dark and raining, though the rain seemed to be slackening. As soon as he felt he had restored his circulation, he settled back against his tree. It was sopping wet but seemed to be his best bet. Suddenly he longed to have a pipe to smoke. To cup it in his hands and shield the match from the weather as he lit up. To see the friendly light from the match in this awful darkness. To see the warm red glow of the tobacco as he



puffed it and feel the warmth of the bowl in his hands. It was fifteen years since he had given up smoking. He sighed and snuggled up against the wet tree again.

And still couldn't sleep. He found himself standing on the bank above the falls with Justin, not listening to what the man was saying. So obsessed was he with the idea that anything Borways suggested would be disastrous to his pet waterfall that he just didn't hear what Borways was trying to tell him. No, he had heard all right, but he hadn't listened. He was imagining a two-lane Ministry of Works bridge across the river where they were standing and a great road leading to a ten story block that stood on a piece of ground hacked out of the hillside, and he didn't want to know anything else about it.

That was the truth, wasn't it? Insensitive, money-grabbing Borways or insensitive Pritchard? Insensitive to any ideas other than his own. Now he knew which was true.

The picture Borways had painted for him was of a graceful bridge spanning the river, with a low arch and tasteful wrought-iron railings and a road that led up to the piece of flat ground that stood a little downriver of the falls. A narrow ledge, but not so narrow that it

couldn't hold a long, low, rambling building, two stories at most, with pleasant balconies and gabled roofs, shingled or maybe even thatched. There would be clematis on the balcony rails and pleasant gardens in front of the hotel and a strip of lawn along the clifftop where the visitors would get the best view of the falls.

And beyond the main building there would be several small chalets, each with its own tended garden. And on the steep, rough hillside behind the little shelf, trees would be planted. Borways didn't know what sort, but Steve did—natives, the tall rimus, miros, and their sisters that would take a man's lifetime to grow to their full height; among them, to give shade and greenery in the near future, pongas, cabbage trees, five finger, and kowhai. He found himself planning their planting and shook himself. It wasn't going to happen now. He should be pleased. He thought about the barren, scrubby hillside as it was and felt the tears welling up.

He woke feeling almost at the point of death and for a while wished he could die. The rain had stopped, and there was a faint light on the track. He looked at his watch—five eleven. There was only one

thing to do, he had to get home as quickly as possible.

It wasn't as simple as it sounded. For one thing the night had taken its toll—he was cold, stiff, and hungry and felt the weight of his sixty-one years, which he'd never even thought about before. The track's condition was atrocious after the rain, and his smooth-soled office shoes found no grip on the mud. Twice in the space of a hundred yards he went down, jarring his spine and wrists and getting covered in mud. He would have to take things easier, at least until the light got better and he could pick out the mud patches better. He managed to find a manuka stick to serve as a staff and give him some security against falling and made his way steadily towards the falls, longing to be home and soaking in a deep, hot bath.

But even such a simple thought brought a train of other thoughts to plague him. Hot water—electricity (he wouldn't have had *that* in his cave, would he?)—dams. How often had he led protest campaigns against the building of dams? Dams that produced his hot baths without polluting the atmosphere.

He hadn't always thought things through, had he? He was a fanatic, pure and simple, incapable of distinguishing between

resource management and greedy destruction.

Well, maybe Borways had had a good idea, even if it was for the wrong reasons, but he had been a vandal in other parts of the world. He was a man motivated by greed. This thought gave Pritchard some comfort as he staggered along the slippery track, tearing his clothes and scratching his face on protruding branches. He began thinking again of the hot tub he was heading for. Maybe he shouldn't have protested against the building of dams (an immigrant friend had once told him that in his old country building a dam was conservation at its height), but what about the slaughter of whales, cutting down beech forests to make chips and other trees to make paper to fill the ever increasing demand for forms to fill in, not to mention the never-ending stream of advertising flyers? Surely somebody was needed to protest such things?

He began to feel better as the light improved, his clothes dried, and some warmth seeped into his bones. God, but he was going to be stiff tomorrow. All this trouble on account of a money-grubbing autocrat named Justin Borways. At the thought of the man he almost retched. Arrogant swine, standing there offering him, Steve Pritchard, a

man of principle, a bribe! He wondered why he'd dirtied his best suit trying to save him.

Steve was at the falls now and could see the Mercedes gleaming wetly in the early light. He didn't go near it, simply turned and trudged up the road to the highway. It was six twenty-five. A traveler early on the road stopped for him, spread a newspaper on the front seat of his car, and invited Steve in. He was a considerate young man and accepted Steve's explanation about his condition—he had involuntarily spent the night in the bush—without query. Ten minutes later he let Steve out in the main street, saying that he really was in a hurry, otherwise he would gladly have driven his passenger to his door.

So Steve Pritchard stood on the sidewalk, wearied almost beyond endurance, his mind in a state of turmoil. It was early, he would make it home all right, still undiscovered. Oh, the luxury of a cup of hot coffee, a hot bath, and sleep in a soft bed! And then . . . and then what? Spend the days biting his nails while he waited for things to develop? You consider yourself a man of principle, Borways had said. Every man of principle has his price, what's yours? Steve leant against a doorway for a full three minutes and then

staggered across the road and headed for the police station.

He had it quite clearly in mind what he would say. "I have come to report that Mr. Justin Borways fell into the river at approximately six P.M. last evening and was swept over the falls. He is almost certainly drowned, and I'm afraid it was my fault. I think perhaps you should arrest me for murder." But it didn't come out like that at all. He staggered through the door and half collapsed over the counter, and his words came out all in a jumble, to the amazement of the man at the counter. "All night in the bush—rain—over the falls—drowned—my fault—no, bird's fault. Justin Borways—bird frightened him over falls—drowned—shouldn't have let him—too close to edge—last night six o'clock—" The constable was now supporting him to a chair, calling for hot sweet tea, and sending for the patrol car to take him to the hospital.

### *JUSTIN BORWAYS*

For Justin Borways, too, these were the worst moments of his life. That wretched bird had startled him, and here he was floundering in the river and being swept towards the falls. He saw Steve Pritchard lying

flat on his stomach reaching out to him, shouting for him to swim towards him and grab his hand. What a hope. If there wasn't a very fast rope, it was Borways for the ride of the century. He would need to keep his head, especially to keep it above water, and to call on his luck.

Luck was probably his strong suit. Nobody reached billionaire status without a fair measure of luck. So Justin didn't try to swim, he just tried not to sink and to keep breathing whenever his head was in the air.

The first part of the ride was really quite comfortable. He tried as best he could, without expending too much energy, to steer himself into the middle of the channel so as to avoid colliding with rocks. He was in the chute now, and the rocky sides swept by at incredible speed. He saw it would be only seconds before he went over the edge, and he grabbed a huge breath, determined to hang onto it at all cost. He knew if he hit his head on a rock it would be tickets. But his luck held, and when he did hit bottom, it was with his feet and not hard enough to break anything.

It had all happened too quickly for him to make a plan to kick himself to the surface: he was rushed along and bowled over and over until he struck a miracle current that swept him up.

For two blessed seconds his head was out of the water, giving him time to expel his breath and take in a fresh one and to get a hand out of the water and make a rude two-fingered gesture in case that idiot Pritchard could see him. Then he was sinking again, and this time it really did seem like the end. It probably should have been—the water here was full of air bubbles, and there was no buoyancy to help him up.

Time and again he touched bottom and tried to kick himself up. He knew what the trouble was, and he knew he just had to hold his breath and be carried downstream until the fizzywater was past. His lungs were bursting, and then help came in the form of a memory of small boys at a swimming pool trying to see who could swim the farthest under water. He himself had managed a breadth, but his friend Charlie Joubert managed two. Afterwards he told Justin that the secret was to let your breath out a few bubbles at a time until all your air was gone. After practicing that technique, Justin had managed two breadths, too.

He managed to spread his breath out, so to speak, until at last he kicked himself to the surface. The battle wasn't over yet. A quick gulp of air and he was under again, but he was being

carried downstream in bubble-free water. He swam to the surface without too much trouble, and now he felt he could try to swim to the bank. His clothes hampered him, but he managed a sort of dog-paddle that kept his head out of the water and moved him ever so slowly across the current and towards the bank. He was a strong man, mentally and physically. All the hours he had spent in the gym were paying off. Any thoughts that he might drown were now gone.

But thoughts that he might freeze to death if he didn't get out of the water fast began to assail him, and he struggled to get to the bank. Forward, or rather sideways, progress was slow. He was still being swept down the river at a good pace, and it seemed inordinately hard to get out of the current. But at last his feet touched bottom, and he was able to reach the bank and grasp an overhanging branch.

He had won! Or had he? Not yet. The bank consisted of three or more feet of smooth, vertical rock. He could see the top of it but couldn't possibly reach it. The branch he was grasping came away when he tried to pull himself out on it. There was nothing for it but to half paddle and half swim along the wall of rock until there was a break.

When it came, it was in the

form of a steep little gully that led into a thick bush. Justin debated whether he should go on in the hope of something better, but the cold was seeping right into his bones and he had to get out. It wasn't going to be any warmer, but at least if he collapsed he wouldn't drown. It took all his remaining strength to pull himself out of the water and struggle up to the bush. He drew himself under its sheltering branches and passed out.

When he came to, it was dark with a half moon riding high, giving a pale, eerie light. He was very wet, cold, and uncomfortable, lying under a bushy shrub on a steep slope. Lucky he hadn't slipped into the river again. He fumbled in his wet pocket, then remembered he had purposely left his phone in his car so as not to be disturbed while arguing with that green idiot Pritchard.

At the thought of Steve he felt the anger rising in him. He was what had got him into this predicament. Right from the start of the project Pritchard had been an obstacle. A ridiculous, unnecessary, illogical, time-wasting, idiotic, blind, and unreasonable dog in the manger. Justin knew he should have ridden roughshod over him, but instead he had gone out of his way to help him see some light, and because of that, here he

was half drowned under a bush on a cliffside. He felt again for the phone—it wouldn't have worked anyway after being in the water for so long.

He put Steve Pritchard out of his mind and began to assess the situation in a proper Borways manner. If he couldn't find his way up the cliff, he would have to spend the night out here. It was unlikely that he would be rescued before morning, even if anybody raised the alarm. And that was improbable; some people might wonder where he'd gone, but nobody would call for a search party. Except that Elaine or whatever she called herself? No, that would be snatching at straws. She'd just reckon she'd been stood up and go home cursing him.

He pressed the button on his watch to give a light—nine fifty. He must have been out for nearly four hours. It couldn't be as cold as it felt or he wouldn't have awakened at all. Which meant he had a good chance of surviving the night, but it would be a long one and uncomfortable. He must try for the climb.

He turned over onto his stomach, only saved himself from slipping back by a firm grasp on a branch, and began wriggling through his sheltering bush. The bush grew on a narrow ledge, and beyond that a big

boulder barred his way. He would have to work his way gingerly round it and see what lay beyond. He managed to stand upright and was alarmed at the feebleness of his muscles. He bent about as much as he dared, flexing his muscles to get some circulation back into them, and it was while he was doing this that the light went out.

He stood there facing the boulder in utter darkness. A heavy cloud had rolled across the moon. Justin swore. He waited for his eyes to get adjusted to the new circumstances, but the light, such as it had been, was gone. Slowly and painfully he got down on his hands and knees while he thought this one out. One small slip and he'd be in the river again, and this time the cold would get him while he fumbled in the dark for a landing place. He would simply have to wait for the cloud to pass before he dared move from his tiny sanctuary.

Carefully, keeping contact with the rock on one side and the bush on the other, he managed to get himself into a sitting position; then he explored his bush with his hands. It seemed to be a robust little bush, maybe hemispherical and perhaps six or eight feet across, with lots of thin, springy branches and small leaves. The small shelf he was on was fairly level but only

a foot or two wide before it sloped off steeply. It could be worse, he thought, but not much. It was going to be a long night.

He didn't dare creep under the bush for fear he would slip past its trunk, but he managed to bend some of the branches down so that he could lie on top of them and half under others. He had got himself curled into a ball for the sake of warmth when the rain came down. If I survive this night, he told himself, I'll get that Pritchard. He'll spend some years behind bars. The bastard, home in a warm bed, pretending he was never near the falls this afternoon. His word against mine, ha. Who'd ever believe that cock-and-bull story about a silly bird? He kept his anger going as long as he could; it seemed to keep him warm and determined to survive.

Exhaustion crept up on him again, and he fell into a fitful sleep. He was standing in a large tract of waste ground. Burnt-off stumps stretched into the distance. He could see himself—fat, standing with legs apart, thumbs tucked into his belt, a caricature of the self-satisfied millionaire. A figure appeared, pointing an accusing finger. My God, it was that swine Pritchard. As he neared, Justin saw that he was surrounded by

skeletal figures of men and women. The air became full of birds, and the ground swarmed with animals—apes, lizards, snakes, and many he couldn't identify. They were all dead and yet they were pointing accusing claws at him. His self-satisfaction turned to fear, and he reached in his pocket for his checkbook, but when he tried to write in it, the paper crumbled away.

He awoke with intolerable cramps in his limbs, cold but not deadly cold. The rain had brought warmer air with it. It had stopped now; only the roar of the falls filled the air. Painfully and with extreme caution he managed to unfold himself and turn on his other side. He was wet, but so what—it was only water, he told himself. Water of that quality never hurt anybody. He was still deadly weary, but he was afraid to sleep. His dream haunted him. But it wasn't like that, he told himself. Not at all. All those natives were better off for his projects. And the animals and birds—they simply retreated farther into the brush, didn't they? No, it isn't all that bad. But if that's the way Steven sees it, no wonder he doesn't want me in his country, even though I'm making reparations. At a profit. Well, of course, that's how it works, that's the



way things get done. The swine pushed me in—tried to drown me. No, he didn't. But he thought about it. Wanted to. Justin drifted off to sleep again.

He woke again, confused, bewildered by the strange sound of roaring water and visions of despoiled forests and accusing fingers and a whirring bird and an impossible journey in the water, and slowly it all came back to him. He was still alive, and the battle wasn't over yet. How long would he have to wait for somebody to rescue him? It was a little while before he realized it was light. While there's light, there's hope, he thought, and began to free his stiff-set joints. He managed to get out of the fetal position he was in and rubbed his hands together and clapped them until the fingers flexed again. Then he sat up and untied his wet shoelaces, took his shoes off, and emptied them of water. He got his socks off next and rubbed his feet until some sort of circulation returned. He wrung the water from the socks and put them on again. And his shoes. That was much better.

Should he wait to be rescued? Somebody must be missing him (who?), and the police would find the Merc. The Merc! He had forgotten all about it. He forced his hands into his wet trouser pockets and encountered the comforting feel of his keys. He

stood up on wobbly feet and worked away for a while, cautiously bending his joints and working such muscles as he could without the risk of falling. Then he dropped onto his hands and knees and crawled round the boulder.

His little ledge petered out, but the hillside was rough and rocky and there were hardy little plants jamming their roots into crevices. If you didn't mind the scratches, it was climbable. He inched his way up, studying every little foothold and handhold. After about ten minutes and about as many feet, the slope became less steep, and his confidence grew. It seemed likely that the hill was a round one so that the higher he got the flatter it grew until he was walking on level ground and there was no danger of falling. He sat down, panting, to recover his breath but exultant. Borways, he said to himself, you've done it! You've been over the falls, you've spent a really terrible night, and you have climbed to the top of the hill. All you have to do is find the Merc. He stood up and faced the direction he had just come from. Now, he reasoned, if I turn right, I must come out somewhere near the falls. He could hear their rumble ahead.

It wasn't easy going through the rough scrub; twigs and

branches tore his clothes. What the hell. He stopped, rested, and got his breath back every few minutes, and listened for the noise of the falls to make sure he was holding course. Distances between rests got shorter, but he was encouraged by the sound of the falls getting louder. Quite suddenly he was at the public toilets, and there, down the steps, the Mercedes glistened wetly.

He could have wept with joy as he hurried down and unlocked the door. In spite of all his exertions he was still cold, and his clothes were still damp. He started the engine and switched on the heater and fans, then climbed into the rear seat where there was a small cupboard containing drinks and biscuits. It was six thirty A.M. Ten minutes later Justin felt warmed enough and confident enough to undertake the short drive to town.

He drove straight to the police station. The desk constable was startled to see a second bedraggled man in the space of fifteen minutes.

"I'm Justin Borways, and I wish to make a complaint. Steven Pritchard pushed me in the river, and I was swept over the falls."

The policeman did a double-take. "You—Mr. Borways! But Mr. Pritchard has just reported

that you went over the falls and were drowned."

"Did he indeed. Well, he was right on one count—I went over the falls, all right, but I didn't drown. I spent one hell of a night on the bank. Did he tell you he pushed me in?"

It was a brave start but even the mighty Justin Borways had his limitations, and he had used up his strength. The fillip that whisky and biscuits had given him was wearing off. He felt his knees buckling, and the policeman was running round the counter to keep him from falling, supporting him to a chair. "It's hospital for you, sir, as quick as I can summon the ambulance. They'll soon get you right again, and as soon as you are well enough, we'll take statements from you both."

"But I must know—did he tell you he pushed me in?"

"He wasn't very coherent—he was in a bad way—he did say it was his fault, but a bird seemed to come into it. Do you know what he was driving at?"

The room was getting darker and darker. "That bloody bird," was all he managed to say before he lost consciousness.

### *THE ANTAGONISTS MEET AGAIN*

Steve opened his eyes and

stared at a white ceiling. He felt warm and comfortable. Memory came back slowly. He was waking up from a nightmare that was fading from his mind—something to do with being cold and wet and lost in the bush and a bird came into it, whirring over his head. And suddenly it wasn't a dream any more, and he groaned. How had he gotten home? Where was Vera? No—this wasn't home, this was the hospital. That's where he was—he'd passed out in the police station, and they had brought him here. For the moment his worries were over. He had told them about Justin, he remembered that much. So they would be out searching for the body. Poor old Justin. And they would have told Vera, so she would be along later. He relaxed into the soft, warm bed and started to doze off.

A voice rang out. "Nurse, take this damn thing out of my arm, and get me something to eat. I've had nothing but a few biscuits since lunch yesterday."

That voice! Steve jerked himself up, almost dislodging the drip-feed from his arm. Justin glared at him from a bed on the opposite side of the room. There were four beds in the room. Of the two near the door, one was empty and the other was curtained off.

"So you've come to, have you,

you rotten bastard? You man of principle who pushes a man over the falls and leaves him to drown. What sort of principle is that?"

"I didn't push you, Justin. I didn't touch you. You stepped back when the kereru startled us, and you fell in. There was no way I could get you out. You wouldn't even try to swim to me—you deliberately swam the other way."

"You really think anybody will believe that?"

"It's the truth, and you know it."

"I may know it and you may know it, but when I tell the judge you pushed me in and you talk tripe about a bird, whose version is he going to believe?"

"Your word against mine—that's what you said when you tried to bribe me and I said I'd tell the council."

"And it would have been. And nobody would have believed you then either. Who would believe a man who pushes . . ."

"I did *not* push you."

"All right—who leaves a man to drown and doesn't even send for help. Who . . . what the hell did you do? All I know is that you eventually arrived at the police station a few minutes before I did, in poor shape and very incoherent."

There was a long pause. "Well," said the impatient Bor-

ways, "what happened? Don't tell me—you were hit by a bird's nest falling out of the tree and didn't recover consciousness until this morning, having spent all night in the freezing rain. I'm sure the judge will believe that."

"I made a mistake. I tried to pull you in, but I couldn't reach you. You swam away from the shore instead of towards it, and when I saw you go over the falls, I knew you had had it. Nobody has ever survived going over the falls."

"So you danced a jig of joy and fell into a bramble patch."

"I didn't like you, Mr. Borways, and everybody knew that, which was part of the trouble. I went to the road as quickly as I could and I could see a car coming, but before I could hail it, a thought struck me. We were standing on the bank near the river, and you had said about your bribe your word against mine, and I had countered that if I pushed you in whose word would it be against mine? It was only a joke; of course, but the point was that nobody had seen us there. And the question was, knowing how things stood between us, would anybody believe me?"

"Not likely. Not bloody likely."

"They couldn't prove anything, but there might always be some suspicion. It seemed a better idea to simply go home and

pretend I had nothing to do with it. Nobody knew I'd been there with you, so if I told no one about it, the question of my having anything to do with the accident wouldn't arise. So I turned back from the main road and started for home along the river track where nobody was likely to see me."

Justin was almost apoplectic. "God, I knew you were stupid, but I didn't think you'd sink so low. Here am I half drowned, clinging to the side of a cliff all night in the dark and pouring rain, while you casually walk home. You man of principle—you rotten bastard! You'll pay for it."

"Oh, I'll pay for it all right. If I ever get to sleep again, I'll be dreaming about last night. You clinging to your cliff and me there stuck on the track, not thinking about you, just thinking about how I was to get home undiscovered. And cowering under that dripping tree thinking about your rotten scheme for ruining the falls. Do you know, once I knew you wouldn't be there to go ahead with it, I began to see a lot of merit in your plans. I spent a lot of time thinking about a patch of native forest behind the hotel. I hoped I might get the job of planting it. I'm quite an expert on New Zealand trees and wouldn't

want to be paid for it. Funny, wasn't it?"

Borways gave a snort of disgust. "Yes, very funny, ha ha ha. I'll tell you something equally funny. While I was clinging to my cliff, I quite suddenly went off the idea. I decided I'd had quite enough of this country and its so-called greenies and this waterfall in particular. I'm going to take my entrepreneurial skills elsewhere. I don't want to knock down any more forests, but I may do just that if only to annoy you."

"Justin! You can't mean that."

"As soon as I can get a nurse to bring me my clothes, I'll get my lawyer to file a suit for attempted murder against you, and then I'm off to the States. Nurse!"

"Don't keep shouting. Don't you ever think about anybody but yourself?—you'll wake whatever poor soul is behind those curtains. If you want a nurse, press the bell. It's right beside you on that cupboard."

Borways scowled and pressed the buzzer, holding it down for what seemed like half a minute. A nurse soon came scuttling in.

"All right, Mr. Borways, what's the panic? Do you need some help?"

"Yes, I do. Get this damn thing out of my arm. And then get me my clothes. I want to get out of here as quick as I can. I've

got things to do before I fly back to the States tomorrow."

"Don't be so impatient, Mr. Borways. You came in here in a severe state of hypothermia. I'm not going to let you out until the doctor has looked you over. You may be able to leave this evening, but tomorrow morning would be more sensible."

"Nonsense! Go and get the doctor at once."

"Very well, if that's what you want. He'll come as soon as he can." She bustled out, obviously offended.

The two men propped themselves up on their elbows and glared at each other. "You'll never get away with it," said Steve, "trying to pin an attempted murder rap on me."

"Why not? Your word won't count for much after the way you walked out on me."

"That 'your word against mine' is all very well when there's nobody about. You've been ranting as if we were still at the falls. But we're in a hospital and not alone."

"We were alone—couldn't get a nurse to come here."

"What about whoever is behind those curtains? They don't curtain off a bed unless there's something going on in there."

"Rubbish—I haven't heard a sound from there."

The curtains parted, and a

man in a policeman's uniform looked out.

"That's because you've been making so much noise yourself. Now, would you please keep it quieter. There's an assault victim here, and I'm anxious to hear what he says as soon as he comes round. That's why I'm here. But don't think I didn't hear every word you said. And in case you want to go into that your word, my word routine, I have recorded the whole conversation on tape. So why don't you two gents just settle your differences quietly? Thanks." He stepped back inside the curtains, and in the shocked silence that followed, the two could distinctly hear the peep-peep of an EKG.

The two men stared at each other. Justin's jaw had dropped, and he didn't seem to be able to shut it again. It didn't take long for the import of the policeman's disclosure to sink into Steve's brain.

"That'll teach you to throw your weight around in public places. No more false accusations, now. So what about doing what the man said—settle our differences? Back to square one?"

"Back to square one? Carry on as if last night never happened? Go to the meeting tonight and be told that my wonderful plan is no good because it's against

the principles of a half-witted conservationist who I now know has no principles? What do you think?"

"It will be hard for you, but you're a strong man. A very strong man. How else . . ."

Two people burst into the room pushing a protesting nurse aside—a young man carrying a camera and a young woman with a voice recorder.

"Mr. Borways, we're from the press. We've just heard that you were washed over the falls. Can that be true? How did you survive?"

"I survived like I always do, by keeping a level head."

"That's great—'Tycoon's Level Head Defeats Falls.' We heard you spent the night in the brush on the cliffside—how come nobody found you?"

"There was nobody at the falls to witness the accident except Mr. Pritchard, who in his haste to get help made a misjudgment, slipped, and also spent an uncomfortable night in the brush. He was, of course, of the opinion that I was drowned."

Before she could ask any more questions, the constable, urged by the nurse, appeared and persuaded the two to leave the room, the reporter calling that they'd be back later and that Justin would be a hero.

"Well," said Justin when

peace was restored, "nothing to say?"

"Only one word, Justin, thanks. It wasn't true, and yet in a way it was."

"That's the secret of lying: always tell the truth—or something near it. Nurse! If you can't raise that doctor, at least get us something to eat. I'm starving, and I'm sure Mr. Pritchard is, too. We've an important meeting tonight and need to have our strength back."

Turning to Steve he said, "I'm going to enjoy being a hero. Be a change from always playing the villain. And I'm quite looking forward to the planning meeting tonight. I've got a feeling that now you've had time to think about the scheme you won't be so pig-headedly obstructionist as you usually are. Now, before

you say anything, I am in no way threatening you. I just think you may be able to see things in a more intelligent way. Why does it take so long for somebody to bring us at least a cup of tea?"

"There's no hurry—the meeting's not till eight."

"But there's still something I have to do. I want to go out to the falls again and shoot that damn pigeon!"

Steve was horrified. "Justin, you can't do that. I don't believe you could even think about it. That kereru is a protected species."

Justin laughed. "Of course I wouldn't, old man. I just wanted to make sure you're still a man of principle. Nurse! Oh, thank God. She's got a trolley of grub this time."

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MYSTERY CLASSIC

# OFF THE TURNPIKE

Amy Lowell



Illustration by David Monette

Alfred Hitchcock Mystery Magazine 1/97

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Good ev'nin', Mis' Priest.  
I jest stepped in to tell you Good-bye.  
Yes, it's all over.  
All my things is packed  
An' every last one o' them boxes  
Is on Bradley's team  
Bein' hauled over to th' depot.  
No; I ain't goin' back agin.  
I'm stoppin' over to French's fer to-night,  
And goin' down first train in th' mornin'.  
Yes, it do seem kinder queer  
Not to be goin' to see Cherry's Orchard no more,  
But Land Sakes! When a change's comin',  
Why, I al'ays say it can't come too quick.  
Now, that's real kind o' you,  
Your doughnuts is always so tasty.  
Yes, I'm goin' to Chicago,  
To my niece,  
She's married to a fine man, hardware business,  
An' doin' real well, she tells me.  
Lizzie's be'n at me to go out ther for the longest while.  
She ain't got no kith nor kin in Chicago, you know.  
She's rented me a real nice little flat,  
Same house as hers,  
An' I'm goin' to try that city livin' folks say's so pleasant.  
Oh, yes, he was real generous,  
Paid me a sight of money fer the Orchard;  
I told him 'twouldn't yield nothin' but stones,  
But he ain't farmin' it.  
Lor', no, Mis' Priest,  
He's jest took it to set and look at the view.  
Mebbe he wouldn't be so stuck on the view  
Ef he'd seed it every mornin' and night for forty year  
Same's I have.  
I dessay it's pretty enough,  
But it's so pressed into me  
I c'n see it with my eyes shut.  
No. I ain't cold, Mis' Priest,  
Don't shut the door.  
I'll be all right in a minit.  
But I ain't a mite sorry to leave that view.

Well, mebbe 'tis queer to feel so,  
An' mebbe 'taint.  
My! But that tea's revivin'.  
Old things ain't always pleasant things, Mis' Priest.  
No, no, I don't cal'late on comin' back,  
That's why I'd ruther be to Chicago,  
Boston's too near.  
It ain't cold, Mis' Priest,  
It's jest my thoughts.  
I ain't sick, only—  
Mis' Priest, ef you've nothin' ter take yer time,  
An' have a mind to listen,  
There's somethin' I'd like ter speak about.  
I ain't never mentioned it,  
But I'd like to tell yer 'fore I go.  
Would you mind lowerin' them shades,  
Fall twilight's awful grey,  
An' that fire's real cosy with the shades drawn.  
Well, I guess folks about here think I've be'n dret'ful onsociable.  
You needn't say 'taint so, 'cause I know diff'rent.  
An' what's more, it's true.  
Well, the reason is I've be'n scared out o' my life.  
Scared, every minit o' th' time, fer eight year.  
Eight mortal year 'tis, come next June.  
'Twas on the eighteenth o' June,  
Six months after I'd buried my husband,  
That somethin' happened ter me.  
Mebbe you'll mind that afore that  
I was a cheery body.  
Hiram was too,  
Al'ays liked to ask a neighbor in,  
An' ev'n when he died,  
Barrin' low sperrits, I warn't averse to seein' nobody.  
But that eighteenth o' June changed ev'rythin'.  
I was doin' most o' the farmwork myself,  
With jest a hired boy, Clarence King, 'twas,  
Comin' in fer an hour or two.  
Well, that eighteenth o' June  
I was goin' round,  
Lockin' up and seein' to things 'fore I went to bed.  
I was jest steppin' out t' th' barn,

Goin' round outside 'stead o' through the shed,  
'Cause there was such a sight o' moonlight  
Somehow or another I thought 'twould be pretty outdoors.  
I got settled for pretty things that night, I guess.  
I ain't stuck on 'em no more.  
Well, them laylock bushes side o' th' house  
Was real lovely.  
Glitt'rin' and shakin' in the moonlight,  
An' the smell o' them rose right up  
An' most took my breath away.  
The color o' the spikes was all faded out,  
They never keep their color when the moon's on 'em,  
But the smell fair 'toxicated me.  
I was al'ays partial to a sweet scent,  
An' I went close up t' th' bushes  
So's to put my face right into a flower.  
Mis' Priest, jest's I got breathin' in that laylock bloom  
I saw, layin' right at my feet,  
A man's hand!  
It was as white's the side o' th' house,  
And sparklin' like that lum'nous paint they put on gate-posts.  
I screamed right out,  
I couldn't help it,  
An' I could hear my scream  
Goin' over an' over  
In that echo be'ind th' barn.  
Hearin' it agin an' agin like that  
Scared me so, I dar'sn't scream any more.  
I jest stood ther,  
An' looked at that hand.  
I thought the echo'd begin to hammer like my heart,  
But it didn't.  
There was only th' wind,  
Sighin' through the laylock leaves,  
An' slappin' 'em up agin the house.  
Well, I guess I looked at that hand  
Most ten minits,  
An' it never moved,  
Jest lay there white as white.  
After a while I got to thinkin' that o' course  
'Twas some drunken tramp over from Redfield.

That calmed me some,  
An' I commenced to think I'd better git him out  
From under them laylocks.  
I planned to drag him in t' th' barn  
An' lock him in ther till Clarence come in th' mornin'.  
I got so mad thinkin' o' that all-fired brazen tramp  
Asleep in my laylocks,  
I jest stooped down and grabbed th' hand and give it an awful  
pull.

Then I bumped right down settin' on the ground.  
Mis' Priest, ther warn't no body come with the hand.  
No, it ain't cold, it's jest I can't abear thinkin' of it,  
Ev'n now.

I'll take a sip o' tea.

Thank you, Mis' Priest, that's better.

I'd ruther finish now I've begun.

Thank you, jest the same.

I dropped the hand's ef it'd be'n red hot  
'Stead o' ice cold.

Fer a minit or two I jest laid on that grass  
Pantin'.

Then I up and run to them laylocks

An' pulled 'em every which way.

True es I'm settin' here, Mis' Priest,

Ther warn't nothin' ther.

I peeked an' pryed all about 'em,

But ther warn't no man ther

Neither livin' nor dead.

But the hand was ther all right,

Upside down, the way I'd dropped it,

And glist'nin' fit to dazzle yer.

I don't know how I done it,

An' I don't know why I done it,

But I wanted to git that dret'ful hand out o' sight.

I got in t' th' barn, somehow,

An' felt roun' till I got a spade.

I couldn't stop fer a lantern,

Besides, the moonlight was bright enough in all conscience.

Then I scooped that awful thing up in th' spade.

I had a sight o' trouble doin' it.

It slid off, and tipped over, and I couldn't bear

Ev'n to touch it with my foot to prop it,  
But I done it somehow.  
Then I carried it off be'ind the barn,  
Clost to an old apple-tree  
Where you couldn't see from the house,  
An' I buried it,  
Good an' deep.

I don't rec'lect nothin' more o' that night.  
Clarence woke me up in th' mornin',  
Hollerin' fer me to come down and set th' milk.  
When he'd gone,  
I stole roun' to the apple-tree  
And seed the earth all new turned  
Where I left it in my hurry.  
I did a heap o' gardenin'  
That mornin'.  
I couldn't cut no big sods  
Fear Clarence would notice and ask me what I wanted 'em fer,  
So I got teeny bits o' turf here and ther,  
And no one couldn't tell ther'd be'n any diggin'  
When I got through.  
They was awful days after that, Mis' Priest,  
I used ter go every mornin' and poke about them bushes,  
An' up and down the fence,  
Ter find the body that hand come off of.  
But I couldn't never find nothin'.  
I'd lay awake nights  
Hearin' them laylocks blowin' and whiskin'.  
At last I had Clarence cut 'em down  
An' make a big bonfire of 'em.  
I told him the smell made me sick,  
An' that warn't no lie,  
I can't abear the smell on 'em now.  
An' no wonder, es you say.  
I fretted somethin' awful 'bout that hand.  
I wondered, could it be Hiram's,  
But folks don't rob graveyards hereabouts.  
Besides, Hiram's hands warn't that awful, starin' white.  
I give up seein' people,  
I was afeared I'd say somethin'.

You know what folks thought o' me  
Better'n I do, I dessay,  
But mebbe now you'll see I couldn't do nothin' diff'rent.  
But I stuck it out,  
I warn't goin' to be downed  
By no loose hand, no matter how it come ther  
But that ain't the worst, Mis' Priest,  
Not by a long ways.  
Two year ago, Mr. Densmore made me an offer for Cherry's Orchard.

Well, I'd got used to th' thought o' bein' sort o' blighted,  
An' I warn't scared no more.  
Lived down my fear, I guess.  
I'd kinder got used to th' thought o' that awful night,  
And I didn't much mope about it.  
Only I never went out o' doors by moonlight;  
That stuck.  
Well, when Mr. Densmore's offer come,  
I started thinkin' 'bout the place  
An' all the things that had gone on ther.  
Thinks I, I guess I'll go and see where I put the hand.  
I was foolhardy with the long time that had gone by.  
I know'd the place real well,  
Fer I'd put it right in between two o' the apple roots.  
I don't know what possessed me, Mis' Priest,  
But I kinder wanted to know  
That the hand had been flesh and bone, anyway.  
It had sorter bothered me, thinkin' I might ha' imagined it.  
I took a mornin' when the sun was real pleasant and warm;  
I guessed I wouldn't jump for a few old bones.  
But I did jump, somethin' wicked.  
Ther warn't no bones!  
Ther warn't nothin'!  
Not even the gold ring I'd minded bein' on the little finger.  
I don't know ef ther ever was anythin'.  
I've worried myself sick over it.  
I be'n diggin' and diggin' day in and day out  
Till Clarence ketched me at it.  
Oh, I know'd real well what you all thought,  
An' I ain't sayin' you're not right,  
But I ain't goin' to end in no county 'sylum



If I c'n help it.  
The shiv'rin' fits come on me sudden like.  
I know 'em, don't you trouble.  
I've fretted considerable about the 'sylum,  
I guess I be'n frettin' all the time I ain't be'n diggin'.  
But anyhow I can't dig to Chicago, can I?  
Thank you, Mis' Priest,  
I'm better now. I only dropped in in passin'.  
I'll jest be steppin' along down to French's.  
No, I won't be seein' nobody in the mornin',  
It's a pretty early start.  
Don't you stand ther, Mis' Priest,  
The wind'll blow yer lamp out.  
An' I c'n see easy, I got ahold o' the gate now.  
I ain't a mite tired, thank you.  
Good-night.

---

*Our special thanks to William J. Scheick, J. R. Millikan Centennial Professor in the Department of English, The University of Texas at Austin, who sent this story to us. "Off the Turnpike" was originally published in Men, Women, and Ghosts by Pulitzer Prize-winning poet Amy Lowell in 1916.*

# BOOKED & PRINTED

by Mary Cannon



**B**artholomew Gill's novel, *The Death of an Irish Sea Wolf* (Morrow, \$23), grabs his reader's attention from the opening scene and never lets go as it recounts a tale that begins fifty years ago. Gill's protagonist, Chief Superintendent Peter McGarr, is back in his role as head of Ireland's Special Crimes Unit, called to a remote and sparsely populated island off the coast to recreate the scene that left an old man and his blind wife missing, their cottage ransacked, and a neighbor brutally murdered. But this old man is very special, and it is he who is really at the center of this story, for one stormy night an old enemy comes to collect a debt. The characters are vibrant, the suspense is as chilling as the winds that blow across the island, and it will be up to McGarr ultimately to keep or reveal the ancient secret.

**Weighed in the Balance**, Anne Perry's latest Inspector Monk tale, is something of a departure for her, although no less effective than the earlier books in this popular Victorian series (Fawcett Columbine, \$23). A charismatic woman from a small European principality persuades Monk's friend Sir Oliver Rathbone to defend her in a slander case. Countess Zorah Rostova hails from Felzburg, one of the many small monarchies threatened with unification by the larger forces of Austria, Prussia, and Germany. Twenty years earlier Felzburg's crown prince Friedrich had forfeited his future throne to marry the entrancing Gisela, and the famous lovers went into luxurious exile. At a recent houseparty in England Friedrich was thrown from his horse and severely injured. Although the doctor had been certain he was recovering, he suddenly failed and died. Countess Rostova has accused her old rival Gisela of murder-

(continued on page 158)

# THE STORY THAT WON

The August Mysterious Photo-Pamela Klacar of Darwin Australia. Honorable mentions go to Redlands, California; James da; James C. Ross of Kent, Helens, Oregon; Sue Jordan-M. Ward of Goodland, Kansas; Kathy Chencharik of South Royalston, Massachusetts; Nils V. Bockmann of Centerville, Massachusetts; Ralph D. Fleming of Windsor, Connecticut; Gayle Nourse of Clarkston, Washington; and Frank Klose of Oceanside, California.



tograph contest was won by River, Northern Territory, tions go to Jacqueline E. fornica; Robert V. Kesling of Hagerty of Melbourne, Florida; James Wilson of Saint Pate of Atlanta, Georgia; E. M. Ward of Goodland, Kansas; Kathy Chencharik of South Royalston, Massachusetts; Nils V. Bockmann of Centerville, Massachusetts; Ralph D. Fleming of Windsor, Connecticut; Gayle Nourse of Clarkston, Washington; and Frank Klose of Oceanside, California.

## PIPE DREAMS by Pamela Klacar

"What's going on?" Sam Bowen came up to his friend Don Burke, chauffeur to the richest man in the neighborhood.

"I'm waiting for the boss's Roller," said Don grimly, watching the antics of the pipers howling and cavorting in front of them.

"I meant what are *they* doing?" explained Sam, screwing up his face at the ghastly skirl of pipes. "And why are *you* here? You don't use a car wash."

"I took just one day off to attend a family funeral and the boss told that cretin Fitchett to clean the Rolls, so what does he do but bring it here and someone kindly offered to attend to it for him—and the next thing, the car's been *shrunk!*"

Sam narrowed his eyes. "Er—you did say shrunk?"

"Shrunk. Down to the size of a toy car."

"Oh my goodness!"

"Yes indeed. So I come down here today to raise Cain, and these people here offer to help me out. You know how Scots and Irish—Gaelic people—are into magic and spells and stuff? Well, this lot promised they could restore the car to its proper size for a thousand dollars."

Sam's mouth dropped open. "A thousand dollars!" He shook his head sadly. "Well, they say there's one born every minute. Let me tell you, they only charged *me* five hundred dollars."

It was Don's turn to gape, but then he collected himself. "Ah yes, but *your* car's not a Rolls-Royce, is it?"

(continued from page 156)

ing him, Sir Oliver finds himself forced to defend a client whose only proof for her accusation is her estimate of Gisela's character, and Inspector Monk is sent off to gather evidence. As always with Anne Perry, readers get a wealth of colorful characters, social and political details and mores, and a fascinating plot.

E. J. Pugh is the star of Susan Rogers Cooper's latest novel, **Hickory Dickory Stalk** (Avon, \$5.50). E. J. is a generously proportioned wife, mom, and published romance novelist, ready with a quip delivered in her Texas twang and a quick draw with the car keys when carpool duties fall to her. But someone has targeted her in a series of nasty pranks, and she reluctantly suspects a teenage neighbor until the tricks turn to murder. Cooper's two books in this series neatly blend hilarity with reality, giving readers credible characters along with occasional zany fun.

If you like a little romance with your suspense, try Sandra Brown's newest, **Exclusive** (Warner, \$22.95). After making a very public mistake, TV reporter Barrie Travis is working for Washington, D.C.'s lowliest TV station when she's asked to meet with the beautiful First Lady in an out-of-the-way spot. It's a strange interview, Barrie thinks, even with allowances for the First Lady's grief over the recent death of her first child. Thus begins her investigation into the perfect couple inhabiting the White House, which leads her to mysterious Gray Bondurant, a former aide who abruptly resigned the year before, following rumors about his affair with the President's wife. Lots of action, some sexual fireworks, and a real twist to the plot. Suspend your disbelief; sit back and enjoy.

Pooch lovers won't want to miss Laurie Berenson's **Dog Eat Dog** (Kensington, \$18.95). Melanie Travis is a single mom with an indomitable Aunt Peg, and it's Peg's conviction that what Melanie needs is to get more involved in Peg's work, breeding and raising poodles. Melanie is less certain. At present she's content with Faith, the poodle puppy Peg has given to son Davey. But she's agreed to join Peg at her local kennel club's monthly dinner and meeting. That's when we meet the characters who subsequently become victims or suspects—or both. Berenson has a breezy style and insider's dog show lore, both of which make this a fast, fun read.

**CORRECTION:** The publisher of Janwillem van de Wetering's *The Hollow-Eyed Angel* (review, October 1996) is Soho Press; Farrar, Straus & Giroux is the distributor, not the publisher.

# CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

AH January '97

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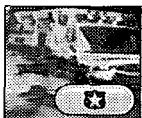
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# Why pay for cellular phone service if you only want it for emergency use?

*The SOS Phone offers a 24-hour call center to connect you with your emergency roadside service, 911 service or family members in the event of an emergency.*



**The SOS Phone gives you instant access to the emergency service you need, from towing to 911, even a family member or friend.**



Last month, I inquired about cellular phone service. I was surprised to find out how expensive it was, even for the most basic calling plans! I just couldn't justify spending that much for something I only wanted for an emergency. Then a friend told me about a product that would solve my problem. It's the SOS Phone—a cellular phone service designed exclusively for emergency use!

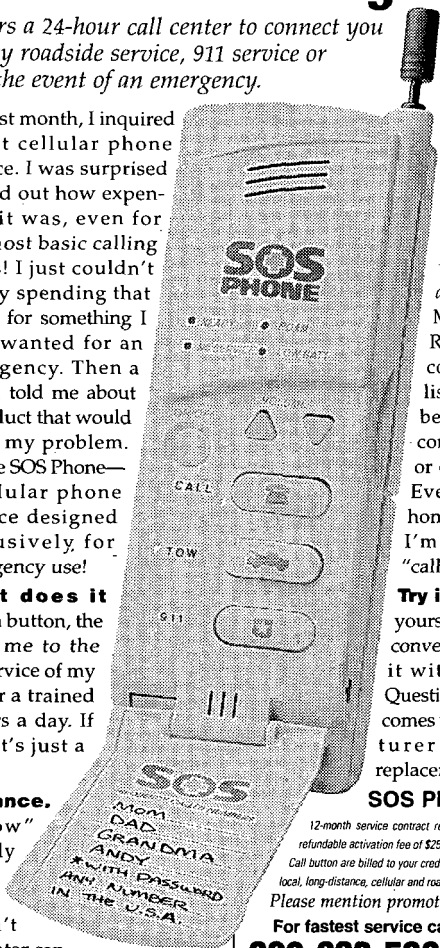
## What does it

**do?** With the touch of a button, the SOS Phone connects me to the roadside emergency service of my choice, a 911 service or a trained SOS operator, 24 hours a day. If I need help, I know it's just a phone call away.

## Emergency assistance.

By pressing the "tow" button, I'll be instantly connected to my emergency roadside service provider. Or, if I don't have one, the SOS operator can recommend one and dispatch them immediately.

The "911" button connects me to the 911 emergency service in my area—best of all, the call is absolutely free!



**Personalized service.** Each SOS Phone has a serial number that is recorded at the Call Center. Each time I use my phone, the operators will know it's me calling, and will greet me by name. My SOS Emergency Record will appear on the computer screen with my list of 10 most-used numbers and the operator will connect me with the person or emergency service I need. Even if I just want to call home to tell my husband that I'm running late, with the "call" button, I can!

**Try it yourself.** Why not try it yourself? If you don't enjoy its convenience and security, return it within 90 days for a "No Questions Asked" refund. It also comes with a three-year manufacturer's limited repair or replacement warranty.

**SOS Phone . . . \$99 \$12 S&H**

12-month service contract required for this price. Requires a one-time non-refundable activation fee of \$25 and a monthly charge of \$9.95. Calls made on the Call button are billed to your credit card at \$1.45 per minute. (That rate includes all local, long-distance, cellular and roaming fees.) For outgoing calls only.

**Please mention promotional code 1788-MG-1539.**

**For fastest service call toll-free 24 hours a day**

**800-238-5322**



**comtradindustries**

2820 Waterford Lake Drive, Suite 102 Midlothian, VA 23113



## HEALTH UPDATE



*After the baby, nothing came off. Then I used the Six-Day BioDiet three times and lost a total of 38 pounds!*

—Gina Muta



# Use metabolic enhancers to shed those unwanted pounds—in just six days!

*New program uses fruit and vegetable diet meals, metabolic enhancers, vitamin supplements and dieter's tea to cleanse impurities from your body, jump-starting you to a new lifestyle!*



*The BioDiet cocktails are made from a wide array of vegetables and fruits. BioDiet provides all the nutritional value you need during the program.*

European wisdom about periodically cleansing the body by abstaining from solid foods is the foundation for the Aspen Spa Six-Day BioDiet. This program of vegetable and fruit juice meals and metabolic enhancers cleanses impurities and takes off up to 14 pounds in six days!

**All-natural.** Ingredients are selected for freshness, purity and nutritional

value. BioDiet's unique blend of nature's best ingredients put your body on the fast track to improved health and weight loss.

### Scientifically formulated.

BioDiet's juice cocktails and dietary supplements are formulated to meet your daily nutritional requirements.

### Six days to a new you.

Commit yourself to the program and you'll soon feel the effects of detoxification and weight loss!

After you complete the program, extend your commitment to a healthier lifestyle by choosing high-fiber, low-fat foods. If you haven't reached your weight-loss goals, use BioDiet in alternating six-day cycles until you reach your desired weight.

**Try it without risk.** BioDiet

has a money-back manufacturer's guarantee. If you're not satisfied, return it for a "No Questions Asked" refund.

**BioDiet** ..... **\$79 \$9 S&H**  
Ask about additional BioDiet products available!

Please mention promotional code 1571-MG-1540

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**800-992-2966**



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*On days one, three and five, you'll drink the fruit cocktail, which contains juice from blackberries, white grapes, apples, pineapples, oranges and bananas.*



*On days two, four and six, you'll drink the vegetable cocktail, which contains juice from carrots, celery, tomatoes, watercress, beets, potatoes and radishes.*

*\*Not all ingredients listed*